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LYTTON STRACHEY

LYTTON STRACHEY

A Critical Study

BY

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“‘Few, but roses,’ were his works.”

SIR JOHN SQUIRE

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TO
MY FRIEND
LLEWELYN POWYS

P R E F A C E

I was first introduced to the works of Lytton Strachey in 1926 by the Rev. Jerome D'Souza, S. J., my Professor of English, when I was a student in the B. A. class. Since then I have had several opportunities of reading Strachey's works and thinking about them. I have reviewed *Elizabeth & Essex*, *Portraits in Miniature* and *Characters & Commentaries* as they appeared, and I have taught *Queen Victoria* to my students in the Lingaraj College. And in the present study I have tried to state the facts concerning Strachey, both as a man and as a 'classic', as I understand them, nothing extenuated nor aught set down in malice.

I prepared the first draft of this book in July 1937; and, on some of my friends and others who are entitled to speak with authority pointing out certain defects in my plan as well as its execution, re-typed it in March 1938 with substantial changes. It is superfluous to point out that, working in an out-of-the-way place in India, I could not command many of the facilities necessary for writing a work of this nature. I could gain access to few important books, and fewer journals. The heavy routine work in the College, too, was least conducive to the success of my undertaking. I had generally to play a lone hand with what stray notes I had jotted down in the past few years and what odds and ends that still fortunately remained in my memory.

I should here express my gratitude to Mr. James Strachey, and to Messrs. Chatto & Windus and Messrs. Thornton Butterworth Ltd., for giving me

permission to make the quotations from Lytton Strachey's works embodied in this book. Mr. James Strachey has also gone through the typescript and generously helped me to rectify a few inaccuracies in the biographical section. I am also grateful to Mr. V. K. Ayappan Pillai, Professor of English, Presidency College, Madras, the Rev. Jerome D'Souza, S. J., Principal, St. Joseph's College, Trichinopoly, my colleague Professor S. S. Basawanal, and Mr. M. Graham Brash and Mr. R. C. Burnell of Allied Publishers, Bombay, for many useful suggestions; to my brother Mr. R. Bangaruswami Iyengar for reading the proofs with me; to Principal Dr. S. C. Nandimath of the Lingaraj College for helping me in various ways when I was working on this book; and to the Manager of the Basel Mission Press, Mangalore, for the promptness and taste with which he has been able to bring out this book.

August 1938.

K. R. SRINIVASA IYENGAR.

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CHAPTER I

LIFE

The Stracheys may be said to have been connected with India for over two hundred years. There was a John Strachey, geologist, antiquary and Fellow of the Royal Society; his grandson, Sir Henry Strachey, was in India as Private Secretary to Lord Clive. Sir Henry's son, Edward Strachey, was "an Anglo-Indian of cultivation and intelligence."¹ Of Edward Strachey's children, the eldest son, Edward, became the third baronet; he won some renown as the author of a Jewish History and as the editor of the *Globe Malory*. Another son, Sir John Strachey, rose to be Finance Member of the Governor-General's Council in India in 1876. After his retirement, he published a book on Warren Hastings and his conduct of the Rohilla War, and also *Lectures on India*, which ran into several editions and was for many years a text-book on the subject of Indian Administration. His son, Sir Arthur Strachey, was first Judge of the Bombay High Court, and then Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court, and died at Simla in 1901. A third son of Edward Strachey, Sir Richard Strachey, joined the Bombay Engineers about a century ago and served as Executive Engineer on the Ganges Canal in 1843. He made scientific explorations in Kumaon and Tibet, rebuilt the Allahabad Railway Station, officiated as the Inspector-General of Irrigation, and retired as Major-General in 1871. Four years later he became a Member of the

¹ P. M., 181.

Council of India and in 1892 represented India at the International Monetary Conference at Brussels. He collaborated with his brother, Sir John, on that *locus classicus* on the subject, *The Finances and Public Works of India*. He also founded the scientific study of Indian meteorology.

Giles Lytton Strachey was born on March 1, 1880, in London, the son of General Sir Richard Strachey and Lady Jane Strachey. He was educated privately and then sent to Trinity College, Cambridge. Among his contemporaries at Cambridge were Clive Bell and E. M. Forster. In the fourth year of his University course, he won the Chancellor's Medal with a poem, *Ely*, glorifying Cambridge and its poets and full of echoes in the Tennyson-Arnold tradition. Three years hence he published some verse in the undergraduate anthology, *Euphrosyne*. In the preceding months he had contributed to *The Independent Review* arresting criticisms of French and English books. In 1905 Strachey was still at Cambridge, completing a long essay on the English Letter Writers, "in the hope of winning the Le Bas Prize In the year in question, however, no prize was awarded."¹

Of Strachey's life at Cambridge or afterwards we know at present extremely little. "The biography of the biographer has not yet been written: it awaits an artist worthy of the subject."² It is clear, however, that at Cambridge Strachey had developed an urgent passion for the literatures of France and England. His very first paper to appear in print was a review of an English edition of the *Characters, Reflections and Maxims* of La Bruyère and

¹ James Strachey, *Preface to C. & C.*

² Maurois, *Poets & Prophets*, 151.

Vauvenargues. Other early papers were on Fanny Burney, Horace Walpole, *The Lives of the Poets*, Shakespeare's Final Period, and Sir Thomas Browne. Strachey's enthusiasms are unblushingly and memorably expressed :

"No one needs an excuse for re-opening the *Lives of the Poets*; the book is too delightful. It is not, of course, as delightful as Boswell; but who re-opens Boswell? Boswell is in another category: because, as every one knows, when he has once been opened he can never be shut."¹

One feels sure on reading this that it is no mere trite opening for the essay but an elegant confession of the writer's own experience. In the essay on Browne, Strachey strikes a more personal note :

"The present writer . . . can bear witness to the splendid echo of Browne's syllables amid learned and ancient walls; for he has known, he believes, few happier moments than those in which he has rolled the periods of the *Hydriotaphia* out to the darkness and the nightingales through the studious cloisters of Trinity."²

Earlier in the essay he assures us :

"It is pleasant to start out for a long walk with such a splendid phrase upon one's lips as: 'According to the ordainer of order and mystical mathematiks of the City of Heaven,' to go for miles and miles with the marvellous syllables still rich upon the inward ear, and to return home with them in triumph."³

We could now, with a little effort of the imagination, figure him out at Cambridge, a preoccupied devotee of the Muses, with the unshut Boswell ever at the elbow, or walking in the direction of Grandchester, Histon or Waterbeach, with a Brownian phrase on his lips, with memory full of the ineluctable shudders of

¹ B. & C., 59.

² *Ibid.*, 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 34.

Phèdre and La Bruyère's vivid perceptions of the "whole dismal fatality of things!"

It is not unlikely that Strachey visited France before he finally left Cambridge to settle down in the cottage in Wiltshire that was to be his home for many years. His essay on Versailles concludes with a description that could only have been inspired by a personal visit :

"One must linger among the fountains and the oranges, the bronzes and the marble gods; one must look back upon the palace through the great trees with their pale spring foliage; one must walk, in autumn, down the melancholy avenues banked with fallen flowers; one must sit in the summer shade within earshot of dropping water, and dream of vanished glories and beauties, of crowned and desecrated loves."¹

The exquisite finish of the exclusive culture of seventeenth-century France persistently fascinated Strachey. He was like one who had strayed out of his familiar surroundings, wistfully dreaming of things that were no more. And yet the mere dreaming was so poignant an experience :

"When the morning sun was up and the horn was sounding down the long avenues, who would not wish, if only in fancy, to join the glittering cavalcade where the young Louis led the hunt in the days of his opening glory? Later, we might linger on the endless terrace, to watch the great monarch, with his red heels and his golden snuff-box and his towering periwig, come out among his courtiers, or in some elaborate grotto applaud a ballet by Molière. When night fell there would be dancing and music in the gallery blazing with a thousand looking-glasses . . . and gay lords and proud ladies conversing together under the stars."²

So Strachey imagined, so strained his faculties to

¹ C. & C., 99.

² F. L., 64-5.

traverse the dead centuries, so found a fanciful refuge for his restless spirit.

Apparently, Strachey's essays were attracting some attention. He was the idol of the Bright Young Men. Bloomsbury ! The epithet was being flung at him and his friends. Strachey, Clive Bell, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, J. M. Keynes, Francis Birrell,—here was a regular "Brains Trust !" Fleet Street, with its itch for the commonplace and the colourful, looked askance at the 'highbrow' pretensions of Bloomsbury. Mr. Swinnerton declared :

"Just as it seems to me that this group suffers from intellectual inbreeding, so I feel that it has no relation whatever to the normal life of the community. Before one can appeal to a member of this group, one must be, above everything else, strange. One must be bizarre. One must be exotic."¹

But it was of no avail. The group prospered, slowly but surely. Roger Fry and Clive Bell in Art, Forster and Virginia Woolf in Fiction, J. M. Keynes in the attempt to raise Economics to the level of literature, and Strachey himself in the office of High Priest,—they made Bloomsbury a virile and vital thing.

Strachey was now living in his cottage in Wiltshire, a sensitive humanist and almost a literary recluse. Since 1911 he grew a beard, and looked all the more a recluse. Prowling the downs alone, with perhaps a chiselled phrase of Beyle's or an elegant aphorism of La Bruyère's or a screaming couplet of Pope's tingling in his ears, examining the flowers and the animals on the way with an idle curiosity, and quite possibly concluding the walk with an

¹ *A London Bookman* (New Adelphi Library), 116-7.

annihilating epigram on the spinning-jenny and its disastrous consequences—thus one would like to imagine Strachey's life to have been passed. Of course, there were literary diversions and excitements; there was Mr. Paston's biography of Lady Mary, for instance, to notice in *The Albany Review*. Strachey notes with distress:

"The book, with its slipshod writing, its uninstructed outlook, its utter lack of taste and purpose, is a fair specimen of the kind of biographical work which seems to give so much satisfaction to large numbers of our reading public. Decidedly, 'they order the matter better in France', where such a production could never have appeared."¹

There's the rub! Slipshod England *vis-a-vis* elegant and precise France! Precision, finish, proportion—these attributes of French art Strachey admired and tried to embody in his own work.

Following Strachey's early papers chronologically, we notice that by and by he strays away from the province of pure criticism. Walpole's letters become a peg to hang on a suggestive line-drawing of the man himself. The review of a practically superfluous book on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is transformed into a portrait of the remarkable woman whose "virtue assuredly deserves a crown." Another review is a pretext for sketching the exotic personality of Mademoiselle de Lespinasse; and even a 'set' introduction to a reissue of Mrs. Inchbald's *A Simple Story* is turned into a human record of the lights and shadows of a lone woman's life. These indications sharply enough snap Strachey gravitating towards Biography.

Much of the work Strachey did between 1903 and 1912 was in the shape of book reviews. Strachey was

¹ C. & C., 125.

a professional reviewer for about two years, turning out a review a week regularly for *The Spectator*, and to a great extent lived upon what he earned in that way. These reviews did not wholly express Strachey's own opinions but were to some extent shaped to fit in with editorial notions of what was proper. That was partly the reason why Strachey hesitated to republish these reviews in book form.¹ On the contrary, the reviews included in *Books & Characters* and *Characters & Commentaries* ring sincere and true. When we find Strachey reviewing in 1908 Professor Giles's translations of some Chinese poems, some ten years after the first publication, we are justified in thinking that the review is an honest asseveration rather than a journalistic commentary. These Chinese poems should have swept Strachey off his feet. He reacts to the immutable melancholy of this poetry as he reacts to the serene and sad radiance of bygone Versailles. The poems presumably carried him away,—O, far away!—from the present, to witness Li Po “in a trance of exquisite inebriation”, to gaze adoringly at pink cheeks among pink peach blossoms, “to wander incuriously among forsaken groves”, to mix memory with desire and old Chinese gardens with the interminable alleys of Versailles! Tenuous, indeed, is the matter that could be stuffed into a material record of Strachey's life. And, yet, how intense the other-worldliness of his submission to Art, how absolute these consecrations to the Muses!

At last, in 1912, Strachey published his first book. It was *Landmarks in French Literature*, being No. 35 in the recently launched ‘Home University Library.’ The first edition was not exhausted for over ten years.

¹ Information supplied by Mr. James Strachey.

But between 1923 and 1927 four more impressions were called for and the demand has since been maintained. What is the 'moral' of these facts? Simply this,—Strachey's book scarcely raised a ripple in the placid waters of pre-War England. Mr. G. L. Strachey? Who was he anyway? And, anyhow, who was going to bother about *French* literature? Thus the average man might have argued and left the book severely alone.

And yet today Mr. Guy Boas is "inclined to wonder whether *Landmarks in French Literature* . . . is not Strachey's best book."¹ One feels that it is no mere story of literature—but that it is itself literature. Having thus securely planted the 'landmarks', Strachey could now survey the French literary scene with cheerful comprehension. And the Georgian scene as well. The Great War was being fought, but it left him uncorroded. In October 1915 Strachey could write calmly in an essay on Voltaire and Frederick:

"At the present time, when it is so difficult to think of anything but of what is and what will be, it may yet be worth while to cast occasionally a glance backward at what was . . . it would be a mistake to forget that Frederick the Great once lived in Germany. Nor is it altogether useless to remember that a curious old gentleman, extremely thin, extremely active, and heavily bewigged, once decided that, on the whole, it would be as well for him *not* to live in France."²

The story of the collision between Voltaire and Frederick may "even be instructive as well." Strachey the indulgent ironist and practitioner of philosophic doubt could not help drawing a 'moral' from the diverting vicissitudes of national prejudice. Even when surrounded by the lurid detractors of the barbarism of

¹ *Lytton Strachey*, 4.

² B. & C., 137.

the Hun, Strachey would maintain his own freedom of spirit and assert his right to stand aside and be in doubt. And so Strachey spent these War years, writing of Frederick and Voltaire, of Hardy's new poems, of the immortal Rabelais.

The War, too, with its futility, its misery, its stupidity, may have led Strachey into those far from obscure paths that converged towards the shrine of Victorianism. Strachey might have recollected often the mellowed afterglow of the Victorian sunset, wedged between the Golden and the Diamond Jubilees ; and he might have wondered wherein lay the greatness, the sense of security, the smug assurances of the poets and the prophets, the somnolent ease of the priests and the politicians. The present has its roots in the past, has it ? What a vile mass of disintegration the 'present' is—that is only too clear ! How about letting down a "little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity ?" ¹ The past should throw some light on current confusions and contradictions ; an examination of the Victorian foundation must help one to discover the implications of the Edwardian plinth and the weaknesses of the Georgian superstructure. Thus convinced, Strachey fairly buried himself under blue books and memoirs and diaries, and an incalculable load of Victorian press-cuttings and penny broadsides and pound treatises. Following the involutions of military strategy in the Sudan and in the Crimea, he forgot the orgy of destruction proceeding at the Somme or at Gallipoli ; wrestling with Gladstone and Evelyn Baring, he ignored the Balliol relish

¹ E. V., *Preface*.

in Asquith's phrasing and the elfin intangibility of the Welsh Wizard; busy vivifying the duel between Manning and Newman, Strachey could actually shut out from his mind all thoughts about that other deadly duel in Flanders, fought in trenches and with gas.

The agitations were over at last; the agony—or the delight—of writing was over too. The great day dawned, or was about to do so—but let Mr. Swinnerton describe the event :

“One day in the winter of 1917-18, I found upon my desk a typescript in a cover of crimson paper . . . It was a clean typescript which had been read only once before . . . and I began to turn the pages. They were so enchanting that I continued, and when night fell I could not leave the book, but took it carefully home . . . I had hardly taken the typescript up again after dinner when . . . there was an air raid by Germans. The whirring of aeroplanes overhead, the rattle of machine-gun fire, and finally the frightful thunder of a gun in the field at the bottom of our garden, would all have served to distract a mind less happily engaged; but as it was, with curtains closely drawn to prevent the escape of light, I consorted that evening with Cardinal Manning, Thomas Arnold, Florence Nightingale, and General Gordon. The nineteenth century had come alive again. I was reading the original typescript of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*.¹”¹

Mr. Swinnerton and Mr. Geoffrey Whitworth, readers to Messrs. Chatto and Windus, were, we are told, “as excited before publication as the world was after it.”

Eminent Victorians was published in May 1918. Here was an author, as good as unknown, a book, and its title so commonplace; and hence, amidst the uncertainties of the War and the possibilities of the future, people might have ignored the book altogether. And

¹ *The Georgian Literary Scene*, 377.

yet the unpredictable thing happened. Across the murky horizon of 1918 the book flared up like a rocket ; it became the talk of two continents ; it even travelled to far off India, and Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, reviewing the book in the *Everyman's Review*, declared, "the title is the only commonplace thing between the covers." The Rt. Hon. H. H. Asquith referred in his Romanes Lecture to "Mr. Strachey's subtle and suggestive art." Mr. Augustine Birrell, in the course of an eulogistic review of the book, recommended it "to all would-be biographers", and concluded by saying that "it is one you lay down with regret and will take up again with pleasure."¹ Impression after impression was exhausted, and as month followed month, and the discussion gained in volume and vigour, the public consumption went on unabated.

Dissident voices were not slow in being heard. Some elderly Victorians felt a shock and smelt a rat. Strachey was arraigned for his irreverence, his malice, his "sin against the Holy Ghost"; he was a "debunker", a washer of dirty linen, a drain inspector ! Divines were outraged by Strachey's treatment of Manning, elders by his treatment of Gordon ; and respectable people were scandalised that essays like those on Dr. Arnold and Miss Nightingale should have been permitted to appear in cold print for the unholy amusement of posterity. It was obvious that the strong diet of the book was having a deleterious effect on weak constitutions. But Strachey apparently recked not a jot.

The War was still dragging on and England was spending her £ 7,000,000 a day. When the whole sway

¹ *More Obiter Dicta*, 80 & 89.

of earth was thus shaking like a thing unfirm, Strachey was filled with something like nausea. Mr. Bertrand Russell had been imprisoned for talking Pacifism in those "mad March days". Strachey's views on the subject were not very different. In an article that appeared in May 1918, Strachey attacked the militarist viewpoint put forward by Lt.-General Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven. Doesn't the Baron state that the justification of militarism is that it ensures peace? But remember that the date of writing is A. D. 1917! Doesn't the Baron say that war has its basis in human nature? Strachey bristles with challenges, with suppositions, with annihilating arguments. The Baron has appealed to History, and to History let us go. All that History shows us is that "human nature does change, and it changes sometimes with remarkable rapidity."¹ Strachey hopes—hoped in the very grip of the mid-summer madness of 1918—that militarist ideology and malpractices might prove "the fabric of a vision", which will melt suddenly and be seen no more.

In another article, published a few weeks later, Strachey attacked the muddled and dangerous ideology of "patriots" like Mr. J. A. R. Marriott, author of *English History in Shakespeare*. Strachey's view is that to force, as Mr. Marriott has done, Shakespeare's historical plays to yield a Chauvinist moral, is to do an unnatural and mischievous thing. Commenting, again, on Mr. Marriott's defence of dictatorships, Strachey pungently remarks :

"It is difficult to be certain whether the reader is or is not intended to infer from this that, both in Mr. Marriott's opinion and in Shakespeare's, he should refrain from criticising Mr. Lloyd George; but, in any case, it is surely extra-

¹ C. & C., 242.

ordinary that an English Member of Parliament should apparently have forgotten that it was not through national unity but national disunion that the people of England won their Liberties."¹

One catches in these subacid reminders a sane reaction to the whole dismal futility of the War. One finds oneself thinking of a present-day Voltaire, waging war against sham and humbug, against half-headed thought and half-hearted action.

The War was over at long last. The pulses of a nation's normal life were beginning to beat again. The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, deserted for four years, were now brimming with new hope and humming with new activity. And Strachey paid visits to both the Universities. He was present at a production of the First Part of *King Henry IV* by the Marlowe Society at Cambridge. He noted with pleasure how "all at once, after the icy season of sterility, the sap has begun to flow again, and the exuberance of youth is made manifest."² He went also to one of the undergraduate literary societies at Christ Church College, Oxford, and read before its members his essay on Shakespeare's Final Period.

Such occasional excursions into current politics or diversions in Oxford and Cambridge were the exceptions rather than the rule. Strachey lived still in Victorian England. He was writing a book on Queen Victoria, and for this purpose he was wrestling with cart-loads of memoirs, memoranda, and what not. The huge wheels were in motion, beating amorphous masses into shape, refining a bit here and preserving and setting on the glistening foil many a rescued gem.

¹ C. & C., 246.

² *Ibid.*, 251.

But the work was unfinished—as yet. Meanwhile, why not make some amusing toys? And Strachey, accordingly, gave his audience—shall we say?—some Micky Mouse cartoons. Lady Hester Stanhope, with her nose altogether in the air, Mr. Creevey, the little wretch with a rattling tongue, the absurd Jew-boy, the aged vainglorious Dizzy—these were the streamers, so alluring and so alarming, preceding the iridescence of the genuine article in the press.

When *Queen Victoria* appeared in April 1921, its marvellous fusion of a severe workmanship and a pains-taking scholarship took the reviewers' breath away. Mr. J. C. Squire remarked: "Such closeness and evenness of texture, such clarity and terseness of phrase, can be found nowhere in biography."¹ "The history of the Victorian Age will never be written," Strachey had declared in the Preface to *Eminent Victorians*; and yet one felt that there the *tour-de-force* was, the delight, the applause, and the wonder of the age. *Queen Victoria*, one believed, was not merely the story of the great Queen; it was also the picture of an age, even if an incomplete one. It came, saw, and conquered. It was acclaimed a classic; it became a best-seller; and it was even adapted for the stage by Mr. Walter Pritchard Eaton.

Strachey was famous, he was notorious. People were fascinated and frightened by his art; but read his books they had to, they were too delightful. In May 1922 Strachey published *Books & Characters*, being a collection of critical essays and studies covering a period of about twenty years. It was greeted with a chorus of praise: *The Times* said: "Mr. Strachey's is perhaps

¹ *Books Reviewed*, 90.

the finest critical intelligence at work in English literature today." Nor was academic approval very slow in coming. *Queen Victoria* was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for 1922. Strachey's *Alma Mater*, Cambridge, conferred upon him the honour of inviting him to deliver the Leslie Stephen Lecture for 1925. And the University of Edinburgh enrolled him among its alumni as an Honorary Doctor of Laws.

What was Strachey's appearance during the height of his powers and reputation? Sir John Squire has described Strachey as "a tall, lean, stooping, spectacled, bushy-bearded, staring-eyed creature, with a high almost treble voice."¹ According to Mr. Swinnerton, Strachey

"was fairly tall, but his excessive thinness, almost emaciation, caused him to appear endless. He had a rather bulbous nose, the spectacles of a British Museum book-worm, a large and straggly brown beard (with a curious rufous tinge); no voice at all. He drooped if he stood upright, and sagged if he sat down . . . Sad merriment was in his eye, and about him a perpetual air of sickness and debility."²

And here is M. Maurois's testimony :

"We were alarmed by his tall, lanky frame, his long beard, his immobility, his silence; but when he spoke, in his 'bleating falsetto,' it was in delightful, economical epigrams . . ."³

It should be remembered, however, that these accounts are not by people who really knew Strachey intimately.

There is a photograph of Strachey, taken in 1929, that serves as frontispiece to *Characters & Commenta-*

¹ Quoted in Millett's *Contemporary British Literature*, 479. *

² *The Georgian Literary Scene*, 378.

³ *Poets & Prophets*, 170.

ries, a posthumous collection of his essays. There is also Mr. Henry Lamb's portrait, representing the Strachey of 1912-15, included in M. Maurois's *Poets & Prophets*. What can we make out of these two faces, one the unvarnished, scientific truth, and the other, an emphatic and engaging interpretation? There is nothing unusual in the photograph. It is a virile, masculine face, giving stare for stare, seemingly unwilling and unable to suffer fools gladly. Mr. Lamb's portrait, however, is another matter. It is the Strachey a Gilbert might have conceived and a Sullivan might have interpreted. It is the Strachey that Mr. Swinnerton has described and the Philistines have decried. The limp, interminable legs, the exotic slippers, the pronounced 'high brows', the dreamy look, the fragile figure set on the cringing cane chair, the rug under the arm, the umbrella, the shadowy figures in the background, the dark thick trees is it Mr. Aldous Huxley's "superlatively civilized" savage after all? Or is it the incomparable Bunthorne chewing the languid phrases and naïvely soliloquising :

"Am I alone,
And unobserved? I am!
Then let me own
I'm an aesthetic sham!"¹

Perhaps, the Strachey of fact was neither as the camera snapped him nor as facile fancy painted him. The laughs and the smiles, the zest and the youthful jollity, the quips and cranks and wanton wiles, the shudders and the thrills, and the thousand and one human lineaments in one's character—these the camera cannot reproduce. It is thus not very strange that the photograph should seem almost to belie the accounts

¹ W. S. Gilbert, *Patience*, Act. I.

given by Squire, Swinnerton, and Maurois, which in essentials agree. Strachey was weak in body and shrank from physical exertion, especially after the publication of *Queen Victoria*. The intellect was active but the body was weak; there followed a period of silence.

Mr. Desmond MacCarthy gave a curious explanation of this prolonged silence.¹ Strachey had to live by his pen; but he had also to save his soul. He should write only his very best, else writing would be demoralising, destroying. He had written *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*: what next? Mr. MacCarthy imagined Strachey going to the corner of his study, scrutinising the intriguing chess-board and asking himself in an undertone: what shall the next move be? The Queen? Not Victoria, of course; that was another game, and that was over. Perhaps the good Queen Bess! Or, perhaps, a bishop might do as well—Bishop Creighton, for instance! Or, why not some obscure knight—Sir John Harington! Or why make a decision at all? . . . Then of a sudden Strachey's banker would remind him of the diminishing, vanishing credit—and Strachey would make the move after all, queen or bishop or knight, and confound his opponents!

Here we might refer to Strachey's solitary excursion to the theatre, *The Son of Heaven*. It had been written about 1913, planned as a successful stage thriller, in the hope of making a fortune. The war intervened and Strachey let it remain in his desk, for he now found it impossible to take the play seriously. However, he allowed it to be performed in August 1925 at the Scala Theatre. Only two performances were arranged to raise funds for the London Society for Women's Service, of which

¹ *Sunday Times*, January 1932.

one of Strachey's sisters was Secretary.¹ The cast of the play was made up entirely of Cambridge graduates and undergraduates and the play itself was only a moderate success. It dealt with the Dowager-Empress's Court at Peking during the Boxer period. It was a mixture of rattling melodrama and the true pathos and sublime of poetry. The characters were clearly enough individualised : the young Emperor, his lovely mistress, Ta-he, the notorious Li Hung-Chang, the Dowager-Empress herself, they were all interesting creatures. There were eunuchs ; there were unseemly jokes at Queen Victoria's expense ; and the last scene brought together representatives of the Allied Forces and made a suggestively spectacular appeal. But the play was, on the whole, a disappointment ; and Strachey himself realised that "with his particular talents, ground more familiar to him would be better for him."²

After a silence extending to nearly seven years, Strachey published *Elizabeth & Essex* in 1928. It was not exactly what people had looked forward to, but it was grand entertainment and it was an immediate success. In America it enjoyed an even greater popularity than in England and within two years as many as ten impressions were printed to meet the growing demand.

Strachey's apotheosis was nearly complete. Although there were elements in his art suggestive of earlier masters, it was agreed on all hands that he had done something 'new.' Strachey was translated into German and French. He was included in school anthologies. A whole host of irreverent young men imitated his more obvious grimaces and flooded the

¹ Information supplied by Mr. James Strachey.

² J. C. Squire, *The London Mercury*, August 1925.

market with noisy exhibits of the 'new' biography. And when *Portraits in Miniature* appeared in 1931, a writer in the *Bookman* suggested Strachey's name for the award of the Nobel Prize in literature. Strachey had seemingly taken a thorough revenge on the public for its tardy recognition of his genius. And yet, to careful observers, already the inevitable reaction was showing itself on the distant horizon.

After *Elizabeth & Essex* Strachey wrote no similar sustained work of biography. Though he was still interested in the lives of remarkable or eccentric men and women, he was content to express his interpretation in a luminous miniature; a few brisk lines, dots and dashes, and a shade of red or blue, if you will, and the picture was complete. It was less bother, and, on the whole, more effective. And so Strachey projected on the screen the Aubreys and Muggletons and the rest. The dolls did their appointed duty and threw the illusion of reality around. One forgot that these were mere dolls, however animated and amusing, and one forgot oneself too, watching the puppet-show in progress.

The end was approaching. The energy was imperceptibly ebbing out of that frail being. It was impossible to fight the battle any longer. What was the use? At any rate, he had lived his life, given life to many a historical curiosity and imbued with a splendid animation the very dry bones of history. Had life been granted him for a few more years, he might, perhaps, have achieved some other memorable things as well; the unfinished study on Othello (published after his death in *Characters & Commentaries*) "was to have been one of a series of essays which he had planned to

write upon some of Shakespeare's plays."¹ Nor had he quite done with the Victorians; he was figuring out Matthew Arnold, General Booth, and Robert Browning as other subjects for the exercise of his art, and who knows what stratagems and attacks on the 'flank and rear' were yet teeming in that dangerous brain, inhabiting the frail and exhausted body! Curiously enough, during his last years, Strachey's health greatly improved. In the summer and early part of the autumn of 1931, he seemed particularly full of life and energy. Presently, there were alarming signs that all was not well. Strachey's condition rapidly grew worse in January 1932 and he died at his home in Wiltshire on the twenty-first. The doctors had diagnosed the illness wrongly as paratyphoid; it was the post-mortem that revealed the cause of death to have been cancer of the stomach.² Of the death of him who made the death scenes of his characters a verbal gymnastic fused with the music of sympathy and understanding—of his own death we can but baldly mention the fact that he died, and died when only fifty-one years old.

The late Arthur Clutton-Brock once differentiated between 'intimate' and 'long-distance' popularity. Strachey had strictly none of the qualities that make for long-distance popularity. He hated to vulgarise himself in order to please that wanton jade, the uncritical public. He hated to debase the quality of his work by sedulously cultivating popularity. Like the other members of the Bloomsbury group, he detested the complacency of the fraudulent and the vulgar. He realised with a shock that "whatever happens, the great

¹ C. & C., *Preface*.

² Information supplied by Mr. James Strachey.

mass of ordinary, stolid, humdrum, respectable persons remains the dominating force in human affairs." He correctly gauged "the singular limitations of average passions and average thoughts."¹ It was inevitable, therefore, that Strachey should turn away from what Shelley called the 'polluting multitude'. The world got on his nerves—it were best to keep out. To be in it, but not of it, would be a convenient arrangement! Why, he thought, there was more sense and sanity in those flowers and beasts that were to him perhaps nameless, than in all the plenipotentiaries in the world!

But there was the other side to the medal as well. Strachey was no monster of rectitude and high disdain. He was genuinely human, and unblushingly so at times. According to Mr. MacCarthy, one of the few intimate friends that Strachey had, "nobody could have been his enemy who had ever talked familiarly to him; at heart he was the kindest of men; there never was a devil's advocate who was less of the devil's party."² Even Mr. Swinnerton is sure that Strachey was "personally kind"; but he adds that in "his writings his kindness is only for the weak, or for the weakness in the strong."³ If that were so indeed, Strachey was more than human,—he was like the knights-errant of old espousing the cause of the weak as against the strong! But it is only a half-truth. Strachey could worship the first-rate—even if it were merely an eccentricity—wherever he found it. He too, in his own way, was an explorer into the dark continent of human nature, fishing in the troubled waters of the Nile of ignorance, scaling the peaks of intellectual honesty,

¹ C. & C., 238, 241.

² *Sunday Times*, January 1932.

³ *The Georgian Literary Scene*, 381-2.

and, as a result of these exertions, bringing to light, for our amusement and our worship, some cataract of a Madame du Deffand or some seething ocean of a Voltaire. As one thought of these, one's gratitude to Strachey formed and crystallized, and one penetrated through that stern mask of superiority and one located the simple human being, with a heart full of pity and affection, and eyes that shone forth kindness and sympathy.

Strachey was vitally and vivaciously human, but only when in the midst of kindred souls. In the quiet and security of a friendly fireside, he could scintillate and he could charm and he could entertain; but, when surrounded by the turbulent and the haughty, the vulgar and the conceited, he was chilled and he shut up like an oyster. He retreated into the Bramah casket of his heart, and lay there snugly, almost stifled and petrified. Almost, but not quite! There was always some intangible other-world of poetry into which to escape and breathe therein the fragrant loveliness of souls in undying ecstasy.

CHAPTER II

LITERARY HISTORY

Even if Lytton Strachey had not won great renown as a biographer, he would still have a high place among the critics of our time. It is convenient to discuss Strachey's contributions to criticism and biography separately though they often coalesce to astonish and confound us. The essay on Madame du Deffand, for instance, is a fusion of biography and criticism; so are the essays on Mrs. Inchbald and Beddoes. However, we might consider *Queen Victoria*, *Eminent Victorians* and *Elizabeth & Essex* as biography pure and simple, while 'English Letter Writers' and *Landmarks in French Literature* might be classed as literary history. The rest of Strachey's works are mostly either critical essays or 'portraits in miniature.' Let us repeat that this is a convenient, rather than a perfectly valid, classification.

The earliest sustained work by Strachey was 'English Letter Writers', which, although finished in 1905, was published in *Characters & Commentaries* only in 1933. The essay attempts an evaluation of the achievements of the outstanding English letter-writers. Like all sensible critics, Strachey tells us throughout what *he* thinks of the great letter-writers and not what the latest commentator or thesis-writer has said about them. There is thus a freshness, a directness, and a contagious gusto about the essay that carry the reader forward, inducing in him a desire to read these 'letter-writers on his own account.'

"The most lasting utterances of a man," begins Strachey, "are his studied writings; the least are his conversations. His letters hover midway between these two extremes." Every gradation of human feeling, every trick of composition, every utterance of platitude or wisdom, every possible leap of thought has also been exploited by letter-writers. A letter is an algebraical function whose value is determined by the two tantalizing variables of the writer and the receiver. The possibilities are endless—the possibilities of its composition, and, too, of its preservation for the delight of a curious posterity. It is certain that, in those less spacious days, Chaucer and Spenser, Shakespeare and Marlowe, must have written innumerable letters, reflecting their passions and their delights, their follies and their preoccupations; but not a trace of them remains. "Oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity." We can at best deplore the fact and give thanks for what has yet been miraculously preserved of the Himalayan output of letter-writing in the past.

Strachey's assessment of the various letter-writers is expressed with incisiveness and zest. He has read all the available letters, enjoyed most, admired several, adored some, and disliked a few; and he has expressed his varied reactions simply and beautifully, with illustrative quotations, with decorative similes and metaphors, with elegant and telling generalizations. It is a happy task to follow Strachey in the wake of his enthusiasms and thrills, his regrets for a world that is no more and his exultations at the triumph of sheer technique. The Elizabethans mixed in their letters practical affairs and ethical reflections, gorgeous imagery and point-blank violence. Strachey gives appropriate specimens of the

Elizabethan epistolary art that was indeed a dome of many-coloured glass, reflecting the multitudinous illuminations and aberrations of the Renascent mind. It was just a channel for communicating thoughts—and “all thoughts, all passions, all delights, whatever stirs this mortal frame,” all were indiscriminately poured into the receptive mould of the letter. The elaborate compliment of an Essex, the spear-point ferocity and earnestness of an enraged Sidney, the careful scholarship and moral tone of an Egerton, the mellowed wisdom of a Raleigh, the amazing gymnastics of a Dr. Donne—we are invited to taste it all.

The average Elizabethan letter was a weighty document, and, therefore, “the less letter it.” As Strachey explains—

“Since the seventeenth century, the art of letter-writing has turned aside altogether from the affairs of practical life, from the business of ethical exhortation, and from the elaboration of literary beauties . . . the chief end of stylistic art has come to be the appearance of a colloquial easiness . . . The old style of letter is the more instructive; the new is the more entertaining.”¹

The letters of James Howell, clergyman, royalist and traveller, mark the transition. He is “the direct progenitor of the great eighteenth-century letter-writers.”

On the golden threshold of the eighteenth century, Strachey is in the land of his dreams. He glows with excitement; he throbs with emotion. The eighteenth century, he declares, is one of the two “enchanted islands of delight and of repose.” Then there is a pathetic contrast of what has been with what is; and, all the while, Strachey seems to be holding a brief for

¹ C. & C., 8-9.

the eighteenth century, moving an imaginary jury to absolve that great age of the sins of commission and omission, of artificiality, of frivolity, of barrenness and bloodlessness. Coleridge might protest against Gibbon's 'detestable style'; but to Strachey it was through the penetrating influence of Gibbon's style, with its lucidity, balance, and precision, that "the miracle of order was established over the chaos of a thousand years."¹ Dean Inge might castigate Horace Walpole for his selfishness and self-indulgence; but to Strachey "there is a divine elegance everywhere, giving a grace to pomposity, a significance to frivolity, and a shape to emptiness."² Do not say that the Augustan Age was anaemic of all emotion, expostulates Strachey; the emotions were there, in as high a pressure as before or after, but they turned towards

"the more recondite arts of painting and music . . . it is to be searched for in the visions of Watteau, of Fragonard, of Gainsborough, in the profound inspirations of Bach, in the triumphant melodies of Gluck, and in the divine symphonies of Mozart."³

That is the introductory apologia: the text is yet to come. And it is given with the ticklish exaggeration of a caricature:

"An eighteenth-century letter is the true epitome of the eighteenth century; and the pair of lovers described by Walpole, who sat all day in one room with a screen between them, over which they threw to one another their correspondence, provide the clearest image of that amazing period."⁴

Pope and Bolingbroke, Arbuthnot and Gay wrote interminably to one another; but theirs were elegant

¹ P. M., 163-4.

² C. & C., 300.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

essays rather than spontaneous effusions. Strachey writes of Pope, a little whimsically :

“In the undiscovered limbo of dreams and chimaeras, Pope’s letters to Attossa and to Sporus are among the finest examples of the epistolary art.”¹

Addison was a “charming, polished, empty personality”; Steele’s “happy *naïveté* is often reminiscent of the preceding age”; as for Swift, that intriguing genius, his style

“has no sounding cadences, no splendid figures, no elegant antitheses, no verbal wit. Compared with the sober daylight of Swift’s style, that of a writer like Voltaire seems to resemble the brilliancy of drawing-room candles, and that of a writer like Sir Thomas Browne the flare of a midnight torch.”²

There was, then, Lady Mary, “the least feminine of women,” the neatest contrast to Madame de Sévigné; she too, like her great enemy, Pope, was more at home with her pet aversions than with her admirations. Like Chapman in Keats’s sonnet, Lady Mary was always content to speak out “loud and bold”; her letters “are all in one key—the C major of this life.” Lord Chesterfield’s polished letters, on the other hand, were merely elaborate sermons detailing with a tiresome particularity the baffling minutiae of cultivated behaviour; they must have seemed to the young Stanhope no better than so many weekly doses of epistolary quinine.

“The grave was the one refuge from such a persecution; but who could tell that the grave itself would be safe? Might not a letter from Lord Chesterfield follow one even there, with instructions as to how one should deport oneself in that situation?”³

¹ C. & C., 17.

² *Ibid.*, 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 29.

Strachey's ecstasies are reserved for Horace Walpole. Not only does he devote a whole chapter to Walpole in 'English Letter Writers' but on three different occasions, while reviewing the various volumes of Mrs. Paget Toynbee's edition of Walpole's letters, he lets himself go. It almost appears as if Walpole lived merely to write letters—so enormous is his output. Strachey thinks that Walpole has some claims to be considered as a politician, a man of letters, an antiquary and an inveterate gossip. But what Strachey most admires in Walpole is the amazing versatility of his correspondence, its mixture of the careless and the elaborate, its murmuring conversational ease, its underlying perception of the ultimate futility of existence. In the separate papers on Walpole, Strachey further illustrates the distinctive merits of the letters. There is a felicitous simile :

"His writing . . . is like lace; the material is of very little consequence, the embroidery is all that counts; and it shares with lace the happy faculty of coming out some times in yards and yards."¹

In one of these essays Strachey is at pains to defend Walpole against the charge of lacking true feeling (a charge made by Macaulay and Dean Inge, among others); and the defence is simply that though Walpole's nature was really affectionate, "the masks he wore were imposed upon him by his caste, his breeding, by his own intimate sense of the decencies and proprieties of life."² But one is unconvinced; one remembers Keats's, Lamb's and Hopkins's letters, and one finds it difficult to understand or appreciate the frigid restraint in Walpole's letters.

¹ C. & C., 90.

² *Ibid.*, 93.

Gray, the letter-writer, subdues and puzzles Strachey. Why are Gray's letters so disarming, so captivating, so subduing? Is it their revelation of Gray's inherent refinement and faultless taste? Is it their continuous radiation of Gray's wide sympathies and cosmopolitan outlook? Or is it their perennial humour,—not hilarious like Lamb's nor sarcastic like Swift's—the humour of "the gently ironic suggestion"? Or is it their underlying and unescapable melancholy? But—why analyse what is really unanalysable? One might as well pass on to William Cowper and observe the little pathetic gestures and hear the little sounds that proceed in a delicious continuum from that unhappy "stricken deer." Cowper's letters are perfect as far as they go,

"but they hardly go anywhere at all. Their gold is absolutely pure; but it is beaten out into the thinnest leaf conceivable. They are like soap-bubbles—exquisite films surrounding emptiness, and almost too wonderful to be touched."¹

As one drifts from the letters of Addison, Walpole, Gray and Cowper to the letters of Byron, Shelley, Keats and Lamb, one experiences a rude jerk, one feels that one has stepped forth from the snugness of the conservatory into the wildness and abundance of the forest. In sheer mass Byron's letters are stupendous; they seem to have been dashed off with great vitality, with ferocity, with a staggering velocity; they are reeking with lacerations, blandishments, ravings and blasphemies. Strachey's appreciations of the other letter-writers of this period are eloquent and essentially just. Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne and to Brown,

"in the intensity of the emotions which they display, are unsurpassed in the whole of literature. The same

¹ C. & C., 50.

sacred horror of passion speaks in them as speaks in the lyrics of Catullus and of Heine, and in some of the sonnets of Shakespeare." ¹

As for Lamb's, his

"are letters which a voyaging angel might write to the City of Heaven . . . the letters soar off into . . . regions where the absurd and the serious, the jovial and the pathetic, the true and the false, seem to be inextricably fused together to form one enchanting whole." ²

It is unfortunate that Strachey's survey of the English letter-writers should be incomplete. In his works Strachey generally left our own century alone. Two authors near enough to us in point of time, Hardy and Morley, have no doubt served as themes for two of his essays; but they were belated Victorians, anachronisms in our own day. But why did not Strachey devote a chapter to the Victorian letter-writers, adepts in the art like the Brownings and the Carlyles? Perhaps, already Strachey's antipathies towards the Victorians were crystallizing and he was designing a very different use for the letters of the period! Be that as it may, Strachey's survey stops short with Lamb. It has been informative and stimulating while it lasted, and for that we should be thankful. Criticism can be made a repulsive thing; and literary history can be easily and fatally reduced to an undigested mass of facts and dates and tendencies and movements, in which the wood is lost in the serried ranks of the trees. It is the true critic's job to cohere details into a general pattern and give life to it with the blood corpuscles of the particulars. We have followed, step by step, Strachey's individual assessments of the great letter-writers; as a brilliant interpretation and summary of the

¹ C. & C., 84.

² *Ibid.*, 64, 66.

whole survey we might extract this passage from one of Strachey's essays on Horace Walpole :

"Perhaps the really essential element in the letter-writer's make-up is a certain strain of femininity. The unmixed male—the great man of action, the solid statesman—does not express himself happily on those little bits of paper that go by the post. The medium is unsuitable. Nobody ever could have expected to get a good letter from Sir Robert Peel. . . . The female element is obvious in Cicero, the father—or should we say the mother?—of the familiar letter. Among English writers, Swift and Carlyle, both of whom were anxious to be masculine, are disappointing correspondents; Swift's letters are too dry (a bad fault), and Carlyle's are too long (an even worse one). Gray and Cowper, on the other hand, in both of whom many of the qualities of the gentler sex are visible, wrote letters which reached perfection; and in the curious composition of Gibbon . . . there was decidedly a touch of the she-cat, the naughty old maid. In Walpole himself it is easy to perceive at once the sinuosity and grace of a fine lady, the pettishness of a dowager, the love of trifles of a maiden aunt, and even, at moments, the sensitiveness of a girl."¹

Criticism like this is creative. There may be a false over-emphasis here and a misleading understatement there, but the passage as a whole is vivid with the blinding illumination of truth.

Competent and even admirable in parts as is Strachey's survey of the English letter-writers, it is however his *Landmarks in French Literature* that shows his critical faculties and stylistic brilliance to their greatest advantage. Of this book Mr. Guy Boas wrote :

"It is not often that one can apply the simple word 'beautiful' appropriately and with absolute sincerity to a book, but to this one I should apply it. Also it belongs to that small number of volumes which seem to carry a finality

¹ C. & C., 267-7.

and sense of completeness about them which is in contradiction to their size."¹

How has the miracle been accomplished? Miracle, indeed, it is. To have compressed into only 256 pages (that delectable bed of Procrustes of the Home University Library) the history of a nation's literature through nine centuries; to have done this to a *foreign* literature, with treatises by Dowden and Saintsbury already in the field; to have made the narrative irresistible, full of the rush and tumult, the enchantment and rainbow magnificence of the sounding cataract, of the riot of life and the sweetness of life; in short, to have made a literary history a flawless work of art, having concord of parts, the equipoise of form and matter, and a severe unity, in which the characters live and the literature which they made is revealed as a thing of beauty and a joy for ever—to have accomplished this is certainly to have achieved the marvellous.

Strachey's title makes it clear that he is attempting only a definition of the 'landmarks' in French literature. The nine centuries of France's literary history are partitioned off between seven 'landmarks'; and within each enclosure Strachey builds a little temple; and as Strachey worships at this shrine or that, the reader worships too, and as Strachey passes on to the next enclosure to rear another temple and pay homage to other gods and goddesses, the reader does the same, for Strachey's art, like Keats's *La Belle Dame*, hath him in thrall.

One does not know which to admire most in the book: whether the diverting zig-zag in the argument, with any number of 'Nor is this all' and similar about-turn expressions thrown in to mark the transitions,

¹ *Lytton Strachey*, 4-5.

elaborations and illustrations; whether the stimulating excursions into comparative criticism, weighing in the scales Harpagon and Shylock or Bérénice and Cleopatra; whether the dual art of imprisoning a complex phenomenon into a serene simplicity and studiously inflating an obvious fact with the yellow and purple of gorgeous rhetoric. Strachey's summing-up of a case is always a glorious performance. Thus of the age of Louis XIV :

"The old interests of aristocracy—the romance of action, the exalted passions of chivalry and war—faded into the background, and their place was taken by the refined and intimate pursuits of peace and civilisation. The exquisite letters of Madame de Sévigné show us society assuming its modern complexion, women becoming the arbiters of taste and fashion, and drawing-rooms the centre of life. These tendencies were reflected in literature; and Corneille's tragedies of power were replaced by Racine's tragedies of the heart. Nor was it only in the broad outlines that the change was manifest; the whole temper of life, in all its details, took on the suave, decorous, dignified tone of good breeding, and it was impossible that men of letters should escape the infection. Their works became remarkable for clarity and elegance, for a graceful simplicity, an easy strength; they were cast in the fine mould of perfect manners—majestic without pretension, expressive without emphasis, simple without carelessness, and subtle without affectation. These are the dominating qualities in the style of that great body of literature, which has rightly come to be distinguished as the *Classical literature of France.*"¹

There we have literary and social history, judgement and special pleading, eulogy and criticism.

Or, for another example, read Strachey's defence of the unities of place, time, and action :

"The value of the unities does not depend either upon their traditional authority or—to use the French

¹ F. L., 66-7.

expression—upon their *vraisemblance*. Their true importance lies simply in their being powerful means towards concentration.”¹

The argument is even better stated in the essay on Racine:

“The true justification for the unities of time and place is to be found in the conception of drama as the history of a spiritual crisis—the vision, thrown up, as it were, by a bull’s-eye lantern, of the final catastrophic phases of a long series of events.”²

Finally, which dramatic method has prevailed, Racine’s or Shakespeare’s? Racine’s *Phèdre* and *Britannicus* are still acted with undiminished success; but *Antony & Cleopatra* and *King Lear*, if they are acted at all, are so horribly “mutilated, rearranged, decocted, and in the end, at the best, it will hardly do more than produce an impression of confused splendour on an audience.” Besides, the practice of the greatest moderns like Ibsen, Strindberg, Tchekhov, and Pirandello, as also of English dramatists like Synge and Galsworthy, has been to strengthen the tradition of Sophocles and Racine, rather than of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

Strachey cannot agree with English critics that Racine had no sense of the variegated splendours and mysteries of Nature and of Life. Almost like a lover he can find no blemishes in Racine’s art. Racine too has his sense of the brooding mystery of Nature, its baffling multiplicity and its innate reality, but he suggests these things in the baldest idiom. His technique, working within the most cramping limitations, is for that very reason the most perfect in the history of drama; his versification is a sustained spell, his

¹ F. L., 94.

² B. & C., 7.

rhymes are the very crown of his art, and his psychology is so profound that neither Freud nor Ibsen can stale its terrible accuracy.

But Strachey's tastes are fairly catholic. He can admire classicists and romantics with equal ardour; he has burnt incense at the shrines of Racine and "Stendhal" and also of Beddoes and Blake. But a little bias in favour of the rigours of Classicism is discernible in the main body of Strachey's criticism. No doubt he praises, in eloquent and memorable accents, the romantic exuberance of Victor Hugo :

"When one has come under the spell of that great enchanter, one begins to believe that his art is without limits, that with such an instrument and such a science there is no miracle which he cannot perform. He can conjure up the strangest visions of fancy; he can evoke the glamour and the mystery of the past; he can sing with exquisite lightness of the fugitive beauties of Nature; he can pour out, in tenderness or in passion, the melodies of love; he can fill his lines with the fire, the stress, the culminating fury of prophetic denunciation; he can utter the sad and secret questionings of the human spirit, and give voice to the solemnity of Fate. In the long roll and vast swell of his verse there is something of the ocean—a moving profundity of power."¹

What could be higher praise than that? But—Strachey ominously whispers—tarry a little, there's something else! Victor Hugo had "the soul of an ordinary man"; he was intellectually weak, his outlook was commonplace, he had no humour, he was vain, and his taste was defective; and often his verse betrays "a windy inflation of sentiment, a showy superficiality of thought, and a ridiculous and petty egoism."

¹ F. L., 214-5.

Strachey can certainly react favourably to the unbalanced romantics and orgiastic naturalists—in fact, to the Hugos and Mussets and Balzacs and Zolas. He can even bring himself down to exchange alexandrines with the forgotten heroines of Voltaire. But what really moves Strachey to an ecstasy of intellectual approval and emotional exhilaration is the marble purity and marble finish of classic art—the tragedies of Racine, the fables of La Fontaine that are an integration of “life-like little vignettes”, the prose of Bossuet whose “splendid words flow out like a stream of lava, molten and glowing, and then fix themselves for ever in adamantine beauty”, the novels of “Stendhal” distinguished by “a subtle psychological insight, an elaborate attention to detail, and a remorseless fidelity to truth”, and the flawless art of Flaubert whose effects “creep into the mind by means of a thousand details, an infinitude of elaborate fibres, and which, once there, are there for ever.”¹ Classic art is the more healthy because it alone has harmonised fact and aspiration, knowledge and imagination, outer and inner experience, the grim actuality of suffering and misery in this world and the other-worldliness of happiness and fulfilment; and though Strachey was not averse to drugging himself now and then with romantic melancholy or romantic high spirits, he always returned to classical purity and health “whither his better genius called.”

One may suppose that in a ‘primer’ like *Landmarks in French Literature* there would be little scope for emphasising the uniquely human attributes of the various men of letters or of their physical peculiarities; and that the historian, busy compressing

¹ F. L., 122, 224, 239.

facts and theories to bursting point, will have no inclination to state things with epigrammatic relish or with the assault of humour: the precise opposite is what we find. Thus of Pascal:

"A profound inquietude did indeed devour him. He turned desperately from the pride of his intellect to the consolations of his religion. But even there—? Beneath him, as he sat or as he walked, a great gulf seemed to open darkly, into an impenetrable abyss. He looked upward into heaven, and the familiar horror faced him still.—'Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie!' "¹

Or mark this diagnosis of La Fontaine's art:

"He is like one of those accomplished cooks in whose dishes, though the actual secret of their making remains a mystery, one can trace the ingredients which have gone to the concoction of the delicious whole. As one swallows the rare morsel, one can just perceive how, behind the scenes, the oil, the vinegar, the olive, the sprinkling of salt, the drop of lemon were successively added, and, at the critical moment, the simmering delicacy served up, done to a turn."²

And what exquisite mixture of praise and blame is this:

"Montesquieu's generalisations are always bold, always original, always fine; unfortunately, they are too often unsound into the bargain. The fluid elusive facts slip through his neat sentences like water in a sieve."³

Or, finally, read those brilliant pages devoted to Voltaire, to the final and most important period of his astonishing career. The issue between Voltaire and Frederick, the incredible apotheosis at Ferney, the unceasing war against religion, the private theatricals, the ejection of letters and dialogues with a daemonic

¹ F. L., 61.

² *Ibid.*, 115.

³ *Ibid.*, 139.

pertinacity, the sudden appearance at the French capital and the consequent furore and the lionising of the "undisputed lord of the civilised universe", the eighty-fourth year of his age, and an overdose of opium, and the end of a great epoch—these visions pass before our eyes briskly, with dramatic intensity and with all the pomp and glow of an unrolling piece of gorgeous tapestry. The sketch of Voltaire's person, again, has the piercing vitality of a wood-cut :

"His long, gaunt body, frantically gesticulating, his skull-like face, with its mobile features twisted into an eternal grin, its piercing eyes sparkling and darting—all this suggested the appearance of a corpse galvanised into an incredible animation. But in truth it was no dead ghost that inhabited this strange tenement, but the fierce and powerful spirit of an intensely living man."¹

This is typically Strachey : passing on from physical peculiarities to spiritual realities, and from them both inferring or inducing or interpreting the queer complication in the Art. This is something that transcends mere literary criticism—and this Strachey does again and again.

¹ F. L., 170.

CHAPTER III

CRITICISM

The most popular of Strachey's critical essays are those that are included in *Books & Characters*. Sir Hugh Walpole, reviewing Logan Pearsall Smith's essays, said recently :

"For myself this is the most delightful collection of literary essays since those of Lytton Strachey and of Virginia Woolf's *Common Reader*. It is with those books that this belongs, because it is *very personal, written in beautiful prose, and creative.*"¹

Sir Hugh has correctly enumerated the qualities that make *Books & Characters* a true feast for the mind. These studies of French and English books and characters may almost be looked upon as an elaborate, if only implicit, commentary on Strachey's dictum :

"The difference is typical of the attitude of the two nations towards literature: the English, throwing off their glorious masterpieces by the way, as if they were trifles; and the French bending all the resources of a trained and patient energy to the construction and the perfection of marvellous works of art."²

Shakespeare was more eager to be a Stratford gentleman than to be acclaimed a great dramatist; Sir Thomas Browne and Thomas Lovell Beddoes would have resented the imputation that they were professional men of letters; and what may not have been the imponderable William Blake's reactions to such a material appellation? But Racine and Voltaire and Henri Beyle and Rousseau—they were men of letters, and proud to be such.

¹ *The Book Society News*, 1936.

² F. L., 48-9.

Of the studies in *Books & Characters*, the most disputatious is that on Shakespeare's Final Period. The researches of nineteenth-century scholars have settled, more or less, the thorny question of the chronology of Shakespeare's plays. It is fairly certain that the three last complete plays that Shakespeare wrote were *Cymbeline*, *A Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. What then? These three plays are similar in theme and temper, but they differ at once from the tragedies that had preceded them and the romantic comedies that had appeared earlier still. Why did Shakespeare attempt this new type of drama, which was neither orthodox tragedy nor comedy, but a regular mongrel affair? The themes are the same: the jealousy of Leontes and Leonatus is Othello's jealousy with a difference; *The Tempest* is as full of usurpations and conspiracies as *Macbeth* or *King Lear*; even the villains are true to type, the Calibans and Iachimos being mere reincarnations of the Edmunds and Iagos of the great tragedies. Nevertheless, these last plays end happily; the dead are brought to life, the enemies are reconciled, and joy is the word for all.

What do the critics infer from all this? A whole host of them—Strachey mentions Furnivall, Dowden, Brandes, Sidney Lee, Israel Gollancz and Ten Brink—think that the plays of the last period represent a distinct phase of Shakespeare's mental development; they reveal the natural serenity, sobriety, and sanity of old age, as opposed to the storm and stress and sombre significances of the great tragedies, the work of Shakespeare's manhood. Granted, says Strachey, that Miranda and Perdita are lovely and that Prospero is grave and Hermione serene: but how about the fiendish Iachimo, Cloten, that "thing too bad for false

report", or the "crafty devil", his mother, or the hag-born Caliban, or the ruffianly Sebastian? With appropriate quotations Strachey is able to show that "nowhere are the poet's metaphors more nakedly material." Nor has Strachey any patience with those who would read into the last plays a philosophy of life. There is Providence outside man's perception who is ready to give happiness, joy, and peace to the suffering and the faithful; atonement for wrongs, reconciliation between enemies, these take place after a long time; Providence delays the righting of wrongs, but does not forget, and it is Time that heals all ancient wounds. This is a soothing philosophy, but is it Shakespeare's? Strachey has grave doubts. In the years before retirement, Shakespeare cared not a jot for psychological penetration or even stylistic relevance. Gone were the years when he created his Falstaffs and Hamlets, who went on living even after *he* had done with them. In the sober afternoon of his career he was content to play the indolent grandfather, telling stories of fortunate princesses and wicked stepmothers, of goblins and spirits, of lost princesses and insufferable kings; the tales ended happily, because all fairy tales ought to end so! ¹

"In Shakespeare's later works character has grown unindividual and unreal; drama has become conventional and operatic; the words remain more tremendously, more exquisitely, more thrillingly alive than ever—the excuse and the explanation of the rest. . . At last, it was simply for style that Shakespeare lived; everything else had vanished. He began as a poet, and as a poet he ended. Human beings, life, fate, reality—he cared for such things no longer." ²

¹ B. & C., 51.

² C. & C., 306-7.

The foregoing remarks occur in Strachey's introduction to Mr. Rylands's *Words and Poetry*, published in 1928, proving thereby that he found no reason to shift the position he had taken twenty-two years earlier.

Is Strachey's the last word in the discussion? Strachey's views are characteristically convenient and conclusive—provided one is purblind to other universes in the plays of the last period. That there is arrant bombast and vulgar raving in the plays is true enough: but there are also lines like these which quiver in their nakedness and radiate the eternally human:

“Fear not; ‘tis empty of all things but grief.
Thy master is not there, who was indeed
The riches of it. Do his bidding; strike.”¹

“Pray, set it down and rest you. When this burns
‘Twill weep for having wearied you. My father
Is hard at study; pray now, rest yourself;
He’s safe for these three hours.”²

And even ship-wreck, sheep-shearing, the fetching of logs of wood, and high-way thieving—aren't these, each in its own way, made intensely realistic? Strachey was justified in entering a caveat against the sentimental white-washing of Shakespeare. It was, perhaps, even necessary for him to swing the pendulum too far in the opposite direction in order to shock the High Command of the academic criticism of the day. But he has fastened upon only one of the facets of the truth—and that by no means the most significant one.

One of the most satisfying essays in *Books & Characters* is ‘The Last Elizabethan.’ It appeared in 1907 soon after Mr. Ramsay Colles's edition of

¹ *Cymbeline*, III, iv, 72–4.

² *The Tempest*, III, i, 18–21.

Beddoes's *Poems* had been included in the Muses' Library. Since then we have had Edmund Gosse's Fanfrolico Press edition, Mr. F. L. Lucas's 'Poets in Brief' edition, and Mr. Donner's definitive edition; and several essays and Mr. Donner's memoir have done much to create interest in the life and work of Beddoes. But twenty years ago, Beddoes was little more than a name to the vast majority of students of English. Strachey's essay therefore must have been an eye-opener to many future admirers of Beddoes. To Strachey Beddoes was an anachronism in early nineteenth-century England :

"his proper place was among the noble band of Elizabethans. . . As it happened, however, he came as a strange and isolated phenomenon, a star which had wandered from its constellation, and was lost among alien lights."¹

Then follow some brilliant pages which re-create the known facts of Beddoes's life, and reel upon reel they pass before our bewildered eyes. And when it comes to placing the finger on the crucial marvel in the poet's art and praising it—who can do it more beautifully and effectively than Strachey ?

"Blank verse is like the Djin in the Arabian Nights; it is either the most terrible of masters, or the most powerful of slaves. If you have not the magic secret, it will take your best thoughts, your bravest imaginations, and change them into toads and fishes; but, if the spell be yours, it will turn into a flying carpet and lift your simplest utterance into the highest heaven. Beddoes had mastered the 'Open, Sesame' at an age when most poets are still mouthing ineffectual wheats and barleys."²

Strachey duly catalogues Beddoes's insufficiencies as

¹ B. & C., 193—4.

² *Ibid.*, 208.

a dramatist—but who cares? One has already become a devotee of the author of *Death's Jest-Book*, and one finds oneself murmuring unawares “the red outline of beginning Adam” or “hydrophobic entrails stream with fire” or “If there were dreams to sell, what would you buy?”

William Blake is another poet who has come to his own at the present day. The elaborate commentaries of Arthur Symons and Denis Saurat and the Nonesuch edition of the *Poems* are partly responsible for this rehabilitation. But as early as 1906 Strachey had the perception to write :

“All poetry, to be poetry at all, must have the power of making one, now and then, involuntarily ejaculate: ‘What made him think of that?’ With Blake, one is asking the question all the time.”¹

Strachey does not minimise the difficulties in Blake's poetry—its obscurity, its apparent confusion of the gutter with Hyperion, and its iridescent and vapoury mysticism. But Blake was, like Spinoza, the God-intoxicated human; he was an “intellectual drunkard”; he lisped in lullabies that “will always be strangers on this earth; they could only fall with familiarity from the lips of his own Gods :

above Time's troubled fountains,
Of the great Atlantic Mountains,
In my Golden House on high.”²

Blake's mysticism has frankly puzzled Strachey: its elusive essence, its personal necessity and its transcendental reality have alike baffled him and escaped from his unsure critical grasp. Another such visionary—a Francis Thompson, perhaps—could alone have mensurated the length and breadth of that destroying

¹ B. & C. 183.

² *Ibid.*, 190.

and preserving soul: "for us in our weakness, a few strains of it, now and then, amid the murmur of ordinary converse, are enough."

Strachey's Leslie Stephen Lecture on Pope is, among his critical essays, *sui generis*. It is a rule that foundation lectures are pitifully disappointing; but Strachey's is a stimulating exception. In but eighteen pages of packed brilliance, Strachey ably establishes his point that the heroic couplet was Pope's criticism of life. There is an illuminating account of the vicissitudes of the heroic couplet till it reached a terrible perfection and acquired a terrible utility in the hands of Pope. Strachey claims for Pope success in different styles of writing—the sensuously beautiful, the arrestingly descriptive, the Joycean realistically sordid, the utterly and irreducibly simple. Above all, the true Pope "was put into descriptions of people whom he disliked"—people who have won literary immortality as Atticus, Bufo, Sporus, and Sappho. In this lecture, too, Strachey for once seems to take off his habitual mask and reveal to us one of his persistent cravings. Commenting on one of Pope's singularly lucid passages, he writes:

"Everything is obvious ... The rhythm is that of the rocking-horse; and the sentiment is mere sugar ... What a relief to have escaped for once from *le mot propre*, from subtle elaboration of diction and metre, from complicated states of mind, and all the profound obscurities of Shakespeare and Mr. T. S. Eliot! How delightful to have no trouble at all—to understand so very, very easily every single thing that is said!"¹

Clarity, simplicity, accuracy—these were the cardinal

virtues of prose as well as of verse; and Strachey hankered after these perfections.

In one instance, however, Strachey's usual critical poise quite forsakes him: it is when he is dealing with Matthew Arnold. In the lecture on Pope there is a casual reference to him: "Matthew Arnold was a poet, but his conception of poetry reminds us that he was also an inspector of schools."¹ But eleven years earlier Strachey had devoted a whole essay to a systematic and ungenerous desecration of Arnold. Arnold demonstrated the Victorian era's utter "incapability of criticism!" Could prejudice go further? And the essay concluded, no less witheringly:

"Certainly it is a curious and instructive case, that of Matthew Arnold: all the more so since no one could suppose that he was a stupid man. On the contrary, his intelligence was above the average, and he could write lucidly, and he got up his subjects with considerable care. Unfortunately, he mistook his vocation. He might, no doubt, if he had chosen, have done some lasting work upon the movements of glaciers or the fertilisation of plants, or have been quite a satisfactory collector in an up-country district in India. But no; he *would* be a critic."²

This is not criticism but heartless damning with less than faint praise. Others besides Strachey have assailed several of Arnold's critical positions—but not *thus*, pettishly and without reason. Arnold's definition of the Grand Style, his insistence that poetry should be a criticism of life, his battle-cries of 'high seriousness' and 'sweetness and light', his attacks against the 'philistines' and the 'barbarians'—however we may weary of them now—had a salutary effect in his own day, because they were essentially a protest.

¹ C. & C., 284—5.

² *Ibid.*, 193—4.

against slovenliness and formlessness. And if Arnold, in his zeal, sometimes overemphasised what is incidental and secondary and rather obscured thereby the very essence, let us admit he did commit an error of judgement; but surely the poet of 'The Scholar Gipsy' and the sensitive critic of Wordsworth deserves much better treatment than he has received at the flippant hands of Lytton Strachey.

Happily for us, Strachey is rarely in such naughty, impish mood. His criticisms are generally entertaining, intoxicating, and acceptable. He had, besides, the intuition to play the pioneer in critical taste. We have seen how he delighted in Beddoes and Blake long before the reading public did. In one of his essays, he whimsically pursues the simile of "the rises and falls in the stock market of literature" and recommends to those who are prepared to take some risks the Comedy of the Restoration. Apparently, Strachey's knowledge of the stock market is uncanny. Has there not been a regular boom in Restoration Drama in the post-War years? Mr. Montague Summers's *Nonesuch* editions of several Restoration dramatists, Mr. Malcolm Elwin's and Mr. Dobree's books on Restoration drama, Mr. Crane Taylor's full-length study of Congreve—these, among others, have made Restoration Comedy almost a gilt-edged security. In a later essay, Strachey attempts to answer two questions with reference to Restoration Comedy: firstly, whether it was indecent; and secondly, whether it reflected the society of the time in all particulars. Great names are in the roll of those who have, at one time or another, joined in this discussion: but Strachey's contribution to the debate has the ring of finality. Restoration Comedy *was* indecent, says

Strachey. But none the less plays like *The Way of the World* and *The Plain Dealer*, *Relapse* and *The Provoked Wife* are masterpieces. Some queasy stomachs may not relish them; it is entirely their own affair. But others may delight in them, as they delight in Aristophanes and Baudelaire and Anatole France, and they too have a right to live under the sun. As regards the relation between Comedy and actuality, Strachey writes :

"Perhaps the truth is that pure Comedy, unlike Tragedy and Drama and most forms of fiction, depends for its existence on the construction of a conventional world in which, while human nature and human actions are revealed, their consequences are suspended. The characters in Comedy are real; but they exist *in vacuo*. They are there neither to instruct us nor to exalt us, but simply to amuse us; and therefore the effects which would in reality follow from their conduct must not appear. If they did, the comedy would cease to exist: the jealous husband would become a tragic personage; the heavy father a Galsworthy character; the rake would be revealed as a pest, and the old bore as...an old bore. By the magic of Comedy, what is scabrous, what is melancholy, what is vicious, and what is tiresome in the actual life of society is converted into charming laughter and glittering delight."¹

This diagnosis of the working of the Comic Spirit is among the very peaks of Stracheyan criticism.

The last essay in *Characters & Commentaries* is the unfinished study of *Othello*. The loss sustained by English letters through Strachey's death is felt by us nowhere more poignantly than when reading this minor masterpiece of critical divination :

"The dramatic idea of the *Oedipus* is that of a man who deliberately discovers a horror—a horror which is a

¹ P. M., 47-8.

fact and which, when he knows it, is his undoing. The play consists of this crescendo of discovery, leading to the foreseen and inevitable catastrophe. In *Othello*, on the other hand, the hero is gradually deluded into believing a horror—a horror which is a figment; and the culmination of the tragedy comes, not with the knowledge of a fact, but with the realisation of a delusion. The crescendo, this time, is one of *false* discovery: but in both cases the essence of the drama lies in a mental progression on the part of the hero—a progression whose actual nature and necessary conclusion is not understood by him, but is realised and foreseen at every point by the audience."¹

After a few more pages of such luminous writing, Strachey abruptly breaks off with a clear enunciation of Shakespeare's motives for making Iago indulge in his "motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity."

Taken all together, Strachey's literary histories and essays in criticism are considerable in quantity, and much of them will live. From the very dawn of his intellectual life, French literature and French culture, the Frenchman's love of clear thinking, his critical acumen, his love of order and proportion, his pervasive and faultless taste and judgement had attracted and disciplined Strachey. Even when he was not slow to admire the genius of his own literature—its imaginative intensity, its humour that is almost allied to an "unexpressed Franciscan mysticism", its disturbingly accurate psychological penetration—he felt the necessity of taking full cognizance of the purifying and clarifying efficacy of the Latin (or French) element in European civilization and culture. Strachey's critical judgements, accordingly, bear the unmistakable impress of the harmony effected

¹ C. & C., 309.

in the mind between the unique qualities of the literatures and cultures of England and France.

Strachey was a romantic by temperament, a classicist by training, and often, in his own literary practice, both. The eccentrics and the romantics, the buffoons and the mad men fatally attracted him. He must pore over their memoirs and memoranda, their incoherent letters and illegible script; he must read aloud their frenzied verses and run hot in pursuit of their fugitive beauties; and he must reason out his case with the rigorous training of a classicist and he must write down his conclusions with cogent reasoning but in coloured prose. In literary criticism he was content to follow in the foot-steps of Sainte-Beuve who "saw that the critic's first duty was not to judge, but to understand." Strachey pertinently asked :

"if, instead of asking what a writer is without, we try to discover simply what he is, will not our results be more worthy of our trouble?"¹

No one can legislate for the kingdom of letters; often, as J. K. Stephen remarked, genius finds out what it cannot do, and then promptly does it. A work of art, as Manzoni carefully put it, "offers to anyone who wishes to examine it the principles necessary to form a judgement of it."² A work of art itself furnishes the foot-rule by which it may be measured. In his essay on *The Lives of the Poets*, Strachey differentiates between the old and the new methods of criticism—the pontifical utterances, the judicial pronouncements of Dr. Johnson embodying one method, the method of judging an author as if he were confessing, as if he were a prisoner at the bar; and the

¹ B. & C., 16.

² *An Outline of Modern Knowledge* (Quoted by Abercrombie), 905.

sympathetic interpretations and explanations of a Coleridge or a Sainte-Beuve embodying the newer method. Strachey knows well enough that the former can degenerate into police-court proceedings and the latter into sentimental soda-water. In his own criticisms, Strachey generally keeps to the secure and fruitful middle course, with an enviable and admirable ease.

Accordingly, Strachey's critical evaluations usually preserve the balance between the theory and the reality, the background and the object. For instance, the characteristics of French Classicism and Romanticism are explained, but only in so far as such discussion is necessary for a complete appreciation of either Racine and Bossuet or Victor Hugo and Alfred de Vigny. As a critic, again, Strachey repeatedly revealed the subtle sensibility of a creative artist. Read those incandescent pages describing the art of Racine or the achievement of Saint-Simon or the language of Madame du Deffand—and the words throb and hum and roar, and the touches are many-hued, and every touch tells, and every word cuts or stabs or caresses. Strachey had, moreover, a philosophical basis in his criticism. This was a broad and tolerant humanism that adored the genuine article and hounded out the second-rate, the sham and the spurious. Above all, Strachey reacted to literature as to a palpitatingly living thing, and in result he is, again and again, able to send his readers to the authors and the works that he has criticised. His enthusiasm for literature is catching; we too must come under the spell of the Henri Beyles and William Blakes, the Molières and Racines and Voltaires, and we too must talk about them, even, perhaps, write about them—though; alas, not with Strachey's clarity and charm !

CHAPTER IV

EMINENT VICTORIANS

Strachey the historian and critic of literature was a creature of tradition rather than of revolt ; and hence in that role he was anything but famous. Understood by the few who read him, appreciated by Bloomsbury, but ignored as a negligible quantity by the public : that was the situation when *Eminent Victorians* burst like a bomb-shell on English letters. Like Byron, Strachey awoke one morning and found himself famous. As the creator of 'the New Biography' his name soon acquired an international status. He had now to play a new role and he played it well. From him the public got two more biographies during the next ten years, *Queen Victoria* and *Elizabeth & Essex*. On these three works is built up Strachey's reputation as a master of the art of biography.

In the preface to *Eminent Victorians* Strachey remarked that, in the lives of Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Arnold, and General Gordon, he had "sought to examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth which took my fancy and lay to my hand." He further hoped that they might prove of interest from the historical as well as the strictly biographical point of view. In fact, he darkly hinted that the book might be looked upon as a partial vision of the Victorian Age itself.

It is said that Strachey made biography a popular art ; but the subjects he had initially chosen were by no means interesting in themselves. Cardinal Manning was a saintly prelate, and who can be less intrinsically

attractive than a serious priest? Florence Nightingale dedicated her life to the service of the sick, and that *prima facie* is no subject for romance or comedy. Dr. Arnold was a stern Head Master, and there can be no more intractable subject for a popular biography. General Gordon, of course, had in him some of the curious habiliments of a romantic, but his 'end' was compact of disaster and futility, and it was *this* that Strachey chose to describe. The study of Manning is full of ecclesiastical history, theological subtleties, and the hum of the myriad cog-wheels of Vatican diplomacy; these hundred odd pages trace, step by step, the spiritual progression of Manning from a Church of England curacy in Sussex to the Cardinal's Hat and the Archbishopric of Westminster. And running alongside of this graph, sometimes even intersecting it, we notice another, the graph of Newman. There are discussions on the Oxford Movement and Papal Infallibility, and these are cleverly woven into the texture of the narrative; and there are incursions into politics and into the varied universes of poets, prophets, and politicians; above all, every page bristles with detail, precise, uncompromising, and individually dull. Yet the essay as a whole so grips one's undivided attention that one must read it through at one sitting, nor skip a line of it.

The essay on Florence Nightingale, again, is a painstaking study; it is, in effect, an *exposé* of the

"endless ramifications of administrative incapacity — from the inherent faults of confused systems to the petty bunglings of minor officials, from the inevitable ignorance of Cabinet Ministers to the fatal exactitudes of narrow routine."¹

¹ E. V., 122.

It is also a catalogue of the reforms that Florence Nightingale effected or tried to effect in the War Office, in the Indian Army, in the nursing homes and the big hospitals. There can be no doubt that Strachey is attempting no farce; all the same, the narrative sweeps precipitately on and we too are helpless, carried away by the current. In the same way, the discussion of educational theories and policies in the essay on Dr. Arnold and the discussions on military strategy and imperial diplomacy in the essay on Gordon are least calculated to make a book entertaining, or even interesting. How, then, did Strachey achieve the miracle of such readability, working on materials so dull, drab, and unprofitable? How did he breathe the fire of life into the dead matter of blue books, military manuals, educational codes, and other things equally flat and weary?

Perhaps, what relumed the dead tissues of such intractable matter was the notorious Stracheyan "debunking"! This is not a satisfactory explanation. Other notes are not seldom heard, and they are even more memorable. Of the young Newman, Strachey writes:

"He was a child of the Romantic Revival, a creature of emotion and of memory, a dreamer whose secret spirit dwelt apart in delectable mountains, an artist whose subtle senses caught, like a shower in the sunshine, the impalpable rainbow of the immaterial world."¹

It is magnificent praise, and it is also magnificent poetry: but it is appropriately niched in the regular narrative. In the following passage from the essay on Florence Nightingale, Strachey's eagerness to worship before a genuine shrine is equally evident:

"With consummate tact, with all the gentleness of supreme strength, she managed at last to impose her

¹ E. V. 13.

personality upon the susceptible, overwrought, dis-
couraged, and helpless group of men in authority who
surrounded her. She stood firm; she was a rock in the
angry ocean; with her alone was safety, comfort, life. And
so it was that hope dawned at Scutari. The reign of chaos
and old night began to dwindle; order came upon the scene,
and commonsense, and forethought, and decision, radiat-
ing out from the little room off the great gallery in the
Barrack Hospital where, day and night, the Lady
Superintendent was at her task Wherever, in
those vast wards, suffering was at its worst and the need
for help was greatest, there, as if by magic, was Miss
Nightingale. Her superhuman equanimity would, at the
moment of some ghastly operation, nerve the victim to
endure and almost to hope Her mere presence
brought with it a strange influence. A passionate
idolatry spread among the men; they kissed her shadow
as it passed. . . . 'Before she came,' said a soldier, 'there
was cussin' and swearin', but after that it was as 'oly
as a Church.' She was heroic; and these were the
humble tributes paid by those of grosser mould to that
high quality."¹

Even of Dr. Arnold, Strachey could write:

"His outward appearance was the index of his inward
character; everything about him denoted energy, earnest-
ness, and the best intentions His eyes were bright
and large; they were also obviously honest."²

Of Manning, Strachey notes that, when the grave of
his wife was yet fresh, he "would sit beside it, day
after day, writing his sermons"; and how, several
years later in the Vatican, "the form of Manning,
restless and indomitable, (was) scouring like a stormy
petrel the angry ocean of debate."³ Finally, the
Strachey who insinuates that Gordon was a drunkard
also notes that

¹ E. V., 128 & 132-3.

² *Ibid.*, 180.

³ *Ibid.*, 7, 59.

'when, during the Lancashire famine, a public subscription was opened, finding that he had no ready money, he remembered his Chinese medal, and, after effacing the inscription, despatched it as an anonymous gift.'¹

No! It is not the subject-matter that makes these biographies the superb things that they are; nor is it the studied belittlement of accepted eminence that casts over the pages their irresistible fascination. What, then, is the secret of their success, their vogue, their great popularity? Strachey remarked in the Preface that if the historian of the Victorian Age were wise,

'he will adopt a subtler strategy. He will attack his subject in unexpected places; he will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined.'

Considered as a criticism of the age itself, the strategy pursued in the book is no doubt subtle and dangerous. But consider it simply as a collection of biographies— are not these studies pulsing examples of writing that go straight to our heads, and even to our hearts? But it is difficult to forget the age when reading about the 'eminent Victorians'— nor was it Strachey's wish that we should so forget. His aim is presumably to indict a whole age through the medium of a few of its not very typical representatives. Manning was a scholar and had superabundant energy; he was, within limits, conscientious; but the urge of ambition was in him, and such an urge harbouring in a priest cannot but be a peril to himself and to others; ambition can brook no obstacles to its advancement and can bear no Turk near the throne. And so Manning had to wage a relentless war against Newman till at last the adversary

¹ E. V., 220.

knuckled under. This tale is unfolded with an excruciating particularity and a wealth of irony, a ticklish sarcasm and an occasional glimmer of tragedy. One closes the essay and one is disgusted with the Laocoon struggle of truth against diplomacy, the anatomy of human frustration, and the sinuosities of priestly intrigue. We have no right, perhaps, to generalise thus about the Victorian Age from a knowledge—and who knows even this may not be coloured?—of just a few characters: but that is what we unfortunately and inevitably do. It is the illusion of art; what pleases us, what for the time being convinces us, nibbles away our sense of values and makes us think erroneously of the whole as being only an enlargement of the unpleasant particular that we have been permitted to scrutinize. It is the fatal triumph of supreme art.

Then, again, there is no mistaking the fact that Florence Nightingale was heroic; she lived for others; she sacrificed her life, her happiness, and her love to be able to serve the ailing and the wretched. But “a Demon possessed her”; in her sheer greed for work—work, may be, of irreproachability, of vital national necessity—she drove Sidney Herbert of the War Office through the grovelling uncomfortable groove of innumerable reforms, reforms that exhausted him, that ultimately killed him; the eternal feminine in her that consecrated “with the radiance of her goodness the dying soldier’s couch” was dangerously intertwined with the ruthless masculine that drove a willing team to its certain annihilation; “the force that created was the force that destroyed. It was her Demon that was responsible.”¹ It is not a pretty picture. One may

¹ E. V., 115, 161.

worship it, one may fear it, but one cannot sentimentalize over it, and one cannot shed tears before it. Shall we say that Strachey has desecrated a popular idol? We should be rather grateful to him for re-creating her as she had really lived, and, incidentally, for throwing some light on the inefficiency and insufficiency of the men who, in mid-Victorian England, had had the conduct of the Crimean War. We should remind ourselves that the study was published when the Great War was actually going on. It is not unlikely that Englishmen, disgruntled with the goings-on in 1918, might have, on reading Strachey's pages, had a salutary satisfaction that, two or three generations ago, things had been no better. But, then, there had been Miss Nightingale at least! The individual explained, but was an exception to, her queer Victorian surroundings: and this interpretation, "far from being pert or belittling, is enheartening and exhilarating."¹

Strachey's impeachment of Dr. Arnold occupies only thirty pages but it is scrupulously documented; he might be criticised not for what he put in but what he cunningly left out. Placed at an early age in absolute authority over Rugby School, Dr. Arnold had a great opportunity. The times were propitious; the growing utilitarianism was demanding that the curriculum should be revised to suit the exigencies of the new age; with tact, vision and determination, Dr. Arnold could have sown the seeds of a new culture, broadbased on humanism, in the virgin soil of Rugby. But Dr. Arnold threw away his opportunities, or, rather, put them to perverted use. He said:

¹ Ward, *The Nineteen-Twenties*, 169.

"What we must look for here is, first, religious and moral principle; secondly, gentlemanly conduct; thirdly, intellectual ability.¹

To divert education from its snug mediaeval line of monasticism and mere classical scholarship into the fruitful fields of humanism and science—to do this were worth ambition; but Dr. Arnold was totally blind to the need for reform in this direction. To inflict upon pupils in the lower forms double supervision by the masters and by the sixth form students, and to resort to whipping and flogging of boys in their teens—to do this is to fail as guardian of school boys, and *this*, according to Strachey, was the sum-total of Dr. Arnold's achievement. The public school tradition, its respectability, its worship of good form and athletics, its curious intolerance, its manufacture of prigs, these somehow have had their obscure origin in both what Dr. Arnold did and failed to do. The portrait is certainly a merciless exposure: but as Mr. Birrell pointed out,² the point of view is not very different from that of Dr. Martineau who, writing in 1845, described Dr. Arnold as "respectable in scholarship, insensible to art, undistinguished in philosophy, great in action, though his sphere was not large."

'The End of General Gordon' must have had a piercing relevance to the England of 1918. As regards the intersections in the lines of Gordon's personal character, the essay tells us a great deal; it is almost a terrifying peep into the far depths of Gordon's soul where

"there were intertwining contradictions—intricate recesses where egoism and renunciation melted into one

¹ Quoted in E. V., 182.

² *Mors Obiter Dicta*, 84-5.

another, where the flesh lost itself in the spirit, and the spirit in the flesh.”¹

But the essay has a more sinister significance also. It is in effect a quadrilateral conflict with Gordon, Evelyn Baring, Lord Hartington and Gladstone for the protagonists; and,

“alike in their emphasis and their lack of emphasis, in their eccentricity and their conventionality, in their matter-of-factness and their romance, these four figures seem to embody the mingling contradictions of the English spirit.”²

The pacifist Prime Minister; the vacillating Lord Hartington; the cautious Evelyn Baring; the inflammable Gordon striding the narrow world of politics like a careering Achilles in the full blaze of martial glory; the imperialist Wolseley acting as liaison between a pacifist Government and a volatile mystic; explosions and disasters and a settled Government rocking on its base and a “glorious” slaughter of twenty thousand Arabs and the annexation of the Sudan: these are the crude elements compounded into that breathless narrative of intrigue, mismanagement, tragedy, and revenge. Was the reader intended to draw by implication a lesson about all imperialist wars? Was it a foot-note to the repellent tragedy of 1914-18? Or was it an anticipation of the Abyssinian, Spanish, Chinese and Austrian tragedies of twenty years hence?

The vogue of *Eminent Victorians* was in very large measure due to its workmanship and style: but we will discuss them later. Here we have tried to show how Strachey’s subject-matter, the clear premises, the expertly stage-managed demonstrations, the slyly suggested conclusions, were exactly of a piece to be

¹ E. V., 222-3.

² *Ibid.*, 210.

acceptable to war-weary and disillusioned England. The great of the earth are often pompous and ridiculous and there are dirty patches on every escutcheon. All that glitters is not gold; nor is the lotus any the less precious for emerging out of its muddy, miry surroundings. Drawing nearer those eminent men of yesterday, do we not find them revealed in their human attributes, related to ourselves, the same and yet so different! Are not even the greatest helpless when opposed by a maddening, blinding, destroying avalanche? Could even the irreproachable Gladstone have withstood the obscure forces of reaction ranged against him? Could Sir Evelyn Baring himself, seeing clearly into the future like Tiresias, have intervened effectively and saved Gordon? These questions are as futile as these more recent ones: could Sir Edward Grey, by an earlier categorical pronouncement of Britain's intentions, have averted the Great War? Could Mr. Baldwin and Mr. Anthony Eden, by an earlier and more drastic interference, have preserved Abyssinian independence? There is no answer. History, perhaps, can teach us nothing. But the Stracheyan recapitulation of history is nevertheless a welcome mental tonic.

CHAPTER V

QUEEN VICTORIA

With the publication of *Queen Victoria*, Strachey, for sometime already one of the assets of English letters, became one of its living glories. The difficulties of the biographer of Manning and Gordon were multiplied a hundred-fold for the biographer of the Queen. Mr. Nicolson thus enumerates them :

“The mass of his material was overwhelming. He was faced with eighty-one solid years, and each one of these years was crowded with intricate and important events directly relevant to the subject. He was faced with innumerable secondary characters, most of whom were so interesting in themselves as to distract attention from the central figure. He was faced with vast national movements, with vital developments in imperial, foreign, and domestic policy, with far-reaching changes in the industrial and social condition of England, with intricate modifications in the constitution, with obscure shapings of the national temperament, with all those hidden forces which within those eighty years completely altered the structure of the civilised world. To compress all these within three hundred pages; to mould this vast material into a synthetic form; to convey not merely unity of impression but a convincing sense of scientific reality; to maintain throughout an attitude of detachment; to preserve the exquisite poise and balance of sustained and gentle irony, and to secure these objects with no apparent effort; to produce a book in which there is no trace of artificiality or strain—this, in all certainty, is an achievement which required the very highest gifts of intellect and imagination.”¹

Besides, Victoria was the reverse of frivolous or

¹ *The Development of English Biography*, 148–9.

humorous, and, with her as central figure, it is difficult for the biographer to sustain the interest of the narrative. Moreover, the precise nature and extent of Victoria's political activities are wrapped up still in obscurity, and this is a further difficulty to be faced by her biographer, for the queen cannot be ignored in the woman.

How did Strachey overcome these obvious and numerous difficulties? *Firstly*, he laboriously mastered all the available information. Alas, the apologist of ignorance and its manifold uses was himself a very learned man. The bibliography at the end and the minute references in the foot-notes are a measure of his profound scholarship. *Secondly*, Strachey's triumph is to have made a superbly interesting and vivaciously living woman even of the serious and humourless Victoria. It is her solemnity and lack of lustre, her devotion to her husband's memory and unfaltering sense of duty, her simplicity and sincerity that are often made to provoke our merriment:

“With an absence of reticence remarkable in royal persons, Victoria seemed to demand, in this private and delicate matter, the sympathy of the whole nation.”¹

“Often, for hours at a time, she would sit, with Albert's bust in front of her, while the word 'Approved' issued at intervals from her lips.”²

“The Prince of Wales, in particular, stood in tremendous awe of his mother...Once, at Osborne, when, owing to no fault of his, he was too late for a dinner-party, he was observed standing behind a pillar and, wiping the sweat from his forehead, trying to nerve himself to go up to the Queen. When at last he did so, she gave him a stiff nod, whereupon he vanished immediately behind

¹ Q. V., 238.

² *Ibid.*, 258.

another pillar, and remained there till the party broke up. At the time of this incident the Prince of Wales was over fifty years of age.''¹

Thirdly, Strachey does not dodge the inevitable bugbear of the vagaries of the Queen's politics. He faces the problem squarely and states his own reading of the situation convincingly. The following passage is only a clinching summary of what Strachey has been suggesting all along :

"The same despotic and personal spirit which led her to break off the negotiations with Peel is equally visible in her animosity towards Palmerston, in her threats of abdication to Disraeli, and in her desire to prosecute the Duke of Westminster for attending a meeting upon Bulgarian atrocities. The complex and delicate principles of the Constitution cannot be said to have come within the compass of her mental faculties; and in the actual developments which it underwent during her reign she played a passive part. From 1840 to 1861 the power of the Crown steadily increased in England; from 1861 to 1901 it steadily declined. The first process was due to the influence of the Prince Consort, the second to that of a series of great Ministers.''²

Strachey's tracing of the parallel curves of the vicissitudes of Victoria's personal prestige and of the power of the Crown is equally enlightening.³ *Lastly*, the minor figures of the age are sketched in sufficient detail to bring out the full force of their impact with the central character, but not over-elaborately so as to acquire an excrescent importance in the book. The 'boy Jones', the various would-be assassins of Victoria, the architect Mr. Gilbert Scott, the servants John Brown and Munshi Abdul Karim, they, no less than

¹ Q. V. 246.

² *Ibid.*, 261.

³ *Ibid.*, 263.

the Baron Stockmar, the Lords Melbourne and Palmerston, the Duchess of Kent and the Prince Consort, contribute their appointed quota to the completeness of the final picture. Victoria as woman, Victoria as Queen, and Victoria as visible symbol of a great period in English history—Strachey has sketched her in all the three altitudes and made the final portrait stereoscopic.

A peculiarity concerning the plan of *Queen Victoria* is that more than two-thirds of it are devoted to her life before Prince Albert's death and the remaining third is left to deal with the latter half of her life. Why is this? The primary reason is the paucity of available information :

"The first forty-two years of the Queen's life are illuminated by a great and varied quantity of authentic information. With Albert's death a veil descends. Only occasionally, at fitful and disconnected intervals, does it lift for a moment or two; a few main outlines, a few remarkable details may be discerned; the rest is all conjecture and ambiguity."¹

Mr. Nicolson advances another reason—that the earlier chapters describe the long processes by which the character of Queen Victoria was formed whereas the last third of the book deals with her life "after her character had crystallised."² Here it is pertinent to compare Strachey's with Boswell's method. Like Strachey, Boswell too was ignorant of a considerable period of his hero's life; of the seventy-five years of Dr. Johnson's life, Boswell had direct knowledge only of the last twenty and hence in the biography he devotes four-fifths of the space to the last twenty years and the remaining one-fifth to the first forty-five years.

¹ Q. V., 190.

² *The Development of English Biography*, 151.

Boswell, too, dovetails into the narrative accounts of Burke and Goldsmith, Garrick and Beauclerc, Reynolds and Mrs. Thrale, though only in so far as they add to the stature of the Doctor himself. But while Strachey's art is stereoscopic, Boswell's is cinematographic.

In two other ways Strachey is able to maintain the narrative at a high level of animation. In the first place, Strachey emphasises the human element in his characters. Victoria's passion for her dolls, her preoccupation with the cattle at Windsor, her limited intellectual range, Melbourne's varied indiscretions, Stockmar's gout, Lord John Russell's timid duplicity towards his colleague, Gilbert Scott's easy artistic conscience, the Duchess of Kent's vindictiveness—these evidences of human frailty put the humblest of readers at their ease.

In the second place, Strachey chooses appropriate episodes and digressions to tide over the dull tracts in the story. The Duke of Kent visiting a military school at Brussels, the Lehzen-Conroy quarrel and the Hastings scandal, Lord Melbourne blowing a feather in the midst of a serious interview or going to sleep during Cabinet meetings, Albert shrieking when a girl is led up to him as partner in a dance, the scandal of the Red Room Wine, Palmerston going by a special train on his own responsibility, Louis Napoleon arranging that Victoria's pet dog should be especially brought to Paris to complete her felicity, Victoria's ingenuous remarks on beards—

“ ‘Her own personal feeling,’ she wrote, ‘would be for the beards without the moustaches, as the latter have a soldier-like appearance... on no account should

moustaches be allowed without beards. That must be clearly understood.''"¹—

her agitated reflections on looking into the 'Greville Memoirs', and her arranging that

"Her husband's clothing should be laid fresh, each evening, upon the bed, and that, each evening, the water should be set ready in the basin, as if he were still alive"²—

these anecdotes tease and titillate us, and we, for the nonce ask for nothing better.

It is sometimes remarked that in *Queen Victoria* Strachey came to scoff and remained to pray and that the greatest event in modern biography is the conquest of Strachey by Queen Victoria. These statements are altogether misleading, because they imply that, while writing the latter half of the book, Strachey revised his original viewpoint regarding Victoria's character. If Strachey had not seen the conclusion, in its every shade and in its every curve, even at the beginning, the less exemplary artist he—as Robert Browning might have exclaimed. On the contrary, as we read the book, and drink in rapturously the innumerable details, we are amazed at the art of the biographer who has merged an aesthetic picture in a faithful life-likeness and massed his facts and deftly permuted them to give material shape to his own particular vision of Victoria's life and character.

The facts are these: Strachey has so portrayed Victoria that there is much to admire in the child, the girl, the inexperienced Queen, the haughty and impetuous wife; and there is much to laugh at in the older Victoria, widowed and grown grey in the

¹ Q. V., 213.

² *Ibid.*, 257.

service of her country, head of a multiplying family, mother of her people, outward symbol of a vast Empire. Even in the chapter on her old age (where Strachey ought to be kneeling and praying most fervently), we find him making fun of her views on smoking, on womanhood franchise, on the Russians; of her taste for lowbrow fiction and drama, of her intellectual limitations; of her unliterary and platitudinous style; of her utter lack of humour. There is no question at all of Strachey's coming to scoff and remaining to pray; he is, as ever, only faithfully portraying, in Edmund Gosse's words, "a soul in its adventures through life."

But it may be admitted that certain lineaments in Victoria's character Strachey had always admired, and their continued presence even in her old age he admired all the more. Her magnificent vitality and strength—

"She, too, was stout, but it was with the plumpness of a vigorous matron; and an eager vitality was everywhere visible—in her energetic bearing, her protruding, enquiring glances, her small, fat, capable, and commanding hands" ¹—

her desire to be and to do good—

'I will be good,' she said. The words were something more than a conventional protestation, something more than the expression of a superimposed desire; they were, in their limitation and their intensity, their egotism and their humility, an instinctive summary of the dominating qualities of a life' ²—

her absolute sincerity that talks and writes itself out like a turned-on tap, her unfailing sense of duty—

¹ Q. V., 185.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

"Duty, conscience, morality—yes! in the light of those high beacons the Queen had always lived. She had passed her days in work and not in pleasure—in public responsibilities and family cares" ¹—

her displaying to the end persistent vitality : these, no doubt, claim Strachey's attention. Victoria clung to life and to her duty ; she had the courage to act up to her convictions ; and she had a capacity for silent suffering. Strachey was ready to do homage to these virtues and make his readers do the same.

Another reason why Strachey might have felt drawn towards the older Victoria is that in later life she interfered with politics less and less :

"with no Albert to guide her, with no Beaconsfield to enflame her, she was willing enough to abandon the dangerous questions of diplomacy to the wisdom of Lord Salisbury." ²

She was content to be a grandiose matriarch ; she was good, she did no harm, she was active at the ripe old age of eighty, she was punctilious, she loved her children and her grand-children, and she loved her beloved people—but these are exactly the endearing qualities of a benevolent and capable grandmother, rather than of a great Queen. The contrast is glaring when one reads Strachey's fervent eulogy of Queen Elizabeth immediately after all this curious zig-zag of praise about Queen Victoria.

¹ Q. V., 264.

² *Ibid.*, 248.

CHAPTER VI

ELIZABETH & ESSEX

Elizabeth & Essex is Strachey's *Antony & Cleopatra*. It is the tragic history of "the boy, in his excitement, walking home through the dawn, the smiling Queen in the darkness."¹ Strachey has done with Victoria and her Age. Why not take a holiday to Elizabethan England? Doubtless, it is a strange world, a very, very puzzling world, and, for that very reason, attractive to an emotional adventurer. Strachey is confused, but he is also fascinated. The romantic in him is excited, the psychologist is challenged to perspicuous activity. He writes despairingly :

"The inconsistency of the Elizabethans exceeds the limits permitted to man. Their elements fly off from one another wildly; we seize them; we struggle hard to shake them together into a single compound, and the retort bursts."²

With the Age of Elizabeth, neither ignorance nor bookish knowledge would pay the historian; the Elizabethans had outwitted their continental contemporaries, and they are outwitting posterity as well. Perhaps, by severely localising the attack, one might hope to get a gleam of the workings of the Elizabethan mind. Accordingly, Strachey attempts in his book to unfold the history of some ten years of Queen Elizabeth's reign. It is a tale of tragic love, frustrated and destroyed by the very powers that brought it into being; and, driven to comparisons, one is thinking of novels like

¹ E. & E., 6.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

The Charterhouse of Parma rather than of histories or historical biographies.

Elizabeth & Essex is a pulsing presentation of a political thesis,—the clash between the Crown and the once all-powerful feudal aristocracy. Since very early times, English history has afforded an illustration of the political see-saw between the feudal barons and the nominal king. In Marlowe's *Edward II*, Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, and Lytton's *Last of the Barons* we notice its repercussions on literature. Strachey's is a similar thesis, and it has added interest because it is the last in English history, the final flicker of the dying candle. It will be a false simplification, however, to describe the book as a mere political tract. Besides the conflict between Elizabeth, symbolising the Crown, and Essex, symbolising the residual feudalism of the Middle Ages, there is also the personal relationship between the two. When the drama begins, Essex,

“the new star, rising with extraordinary swiftness, was suddenly seen to be shining alone in the firmament. The Queen and the Earl were never apart. She was fifty-three, and he was not yet twenty: a dangerous concatenation of ages.”¹

Elizabeth and Essex were contradictory universes and their impact had to be surcharged with all the accumulated and incalculable mysteries of their temperaments. What exactly was Elizabeth's attitude towards her suitors, towards Essex especially? Strachey's diagnosis is super-subtle and intriguing :

“She was a woman—ah, yes! a fascinating woman!—but then was she not also a virgin, and old? But immediately another flood of feeling swept upwards and engulfed her; she towered; she was something more—she knew it; what was it? Was she a man? She gazed at the little beings

¹ E. & E. 5.

around her, and smiled to think that, though she might be their Mistress in one sense, in another it could never be so—that the very reverse might almost be said to be the case. She had read of Hercules and Hylas, and she might have fancied herself, in some half-conscious day-dream, possessed of something of that pagan masculinity . . .¹

Strachey is exercising all his psychological might to lay bare the workings of Elizabeth's mind; he is using dexterously all the weapons in his technical armoury, dashes, dots, rhetorical questions, learned similitudes, antithetical asseverations, blank exclamations; he is rearing with the magic of words the multipartite fabric of Elizabeth's emotional organism. It is hazy, it is tantalising, it takes one nowhere . . . one may angrily mouth these objections; but, confronted by the maddening perversity of Elizabeth, what else could one do? There can be few certitudes concerning the creatures of the Age of Elizabeth. Our judgements can be no more than a discontinuous series of speculations, of wild and self-contradictory guesses, of suggestively vague surmises.

What were Essex's reactions to the impact of Gloriana? Strachey's verbal suppleness rises once more to the occasion :

“Affection—admiration—exasperation—mockery—he felt them all by turns, and sometimes, so it seemed, simultaneously . . . His mind, swept along by hers, danced down delightful avenues. What happy twists! What new delicious vistas! And then—what had happened? The twists had grown abrupt, unaccountable, ridiculous. His head span. There was the way—plain and clear before them; but she insisted upon whisking round innumerable corners, and all his efforts could not keep her straight. She was a preposterous, obstinate old woman, fluctuating only when she should be firm, and strong in nothing but

¹ E. & E., 28.

perversity. And he, after all, was a man, with a man's power of insight and determination; he could lead if she would follow; but Fate had reversed the roles, and the natural master was a servant . . . A woman and a man! . . . It was not only obvious, it was ludicrous, it was disgusting: he satisfied the peculiar cravings of a virgin of sixty-three."¹

What is Strachey driving at? What is behind all those suggestions, suppressions, intimations of a passionnal insurrection? But this much is certain: coming as he did, during the glorious Elizabethan sunset, Essex was doomed. A new aristocracy of cool brain-power—the Cecils, the Russells, and the Cavendishes, as they were to be known to posterity—was under formation; it was in all but name the authority swaying national policies. The Norfolks and Devereuxs and the other members of the ancient aristocracy of birth had no place in the new scheme of things. They could not even play the part of a modern Opposition, for that blessed British solution of divided policies and acrimonious rivalries, the party system, was yet an obscure chromosome in the womb of time. A conflict with the Queen had to wear the colour of a conspiracy; and to conspire against the Crown, however futilely and mildly, was high treason; and the penalty for treason was death.

Grouped round the figures of Elizabeth and Essex are several others, almost as interesting to the geologist examining the buried strata in the human past. If Essex reminds us of Antony with his sensuous temperament and genius for friendship, Sir Charles Travers, Sir Christopher Blount, Lord Southampton, and Henry Cuffe, who loyally share the shattered fortunes of their friend and benefactor, bring to our minds Eros

¹ E. & E., 124-5.

and Scarus of Shakespeare's play. In Francis Bacon we have almost a reincarnation of Enobarbus: but even he, after betraying Antony's trust, redeems himself by the poignancy of his dying words:

"O Antony,
Nobler than my revolt is infamous,
Forgive me in thine own particular;
But let the world rank me in register
A master-leaver and a fugitive."¹

There is no similar redeeming feature in Bacon. He is depicted as the unrepentent, even exultant, betrayer of his patron's cause. Bacon could not see

"that the long friendship, the incessant kindness, the high generosity, and the touching admiration of the Earl had made a participation in his ruin a deplorable and a disgraceful thing."²

In Robert Cecil, on the other hand, we have quite a close approximation to the calculating and competent Octavius; and, perhaps, Raleigh would fill in the bill as a more sinister and more capable Lepidus: indeed, Essex, Cecil and Raleigh form a mutually jealous triumvirate, with the common objective of winning Elizabeth's absolute confidence.

Elizabeth & Essex is a congeries of several conflicts, taking place simultaneously. On the European plane, there is the unending war between Philip of Spain and England's heretic Queen, the succession of Armadas and their annihilation; there is France flirting, now with England, now with Spain; King James of Scotland behaving like a naughty boy; Tyrone's activities in Ireland a perpetual sore: Essex is implicated in all these and his policies on all occasions are the precise opposite of the Queen's. In local politics,

¹ *Antony & Cleopatra* IV, ix, 18-22.
• E. & E., 245.

there is the peace party of the Cecils and the war party of Essex; the quiet, mechanical mastery of men and things that is second nature to Cecil pitted against the dashing romantic youth with "the blood of a hundred Barons who had paid small heed to the Lord's Anointed."¹ There is, again, the impossible antinomy between the grandeur of the renascent culture and the barbarisms and injustices then in daily vogue in Elizabethan England, as, for instance, revealed by "the hideous tragedy of Dr. Lopez."

Some readers have questioned the wisdom of devoting twenty-five pages to the Lopez episode: but it is a significant one and is intended to illustrate some of the wild contradictions of the Age. Dr. Lopez, a Portuguese Jew, Physician to Leicester and Walsingham and the Queen herself, is denounced by Essex as being in the pay of Philip. He is jailed, tried and strung up

"and—such was the routine of the law—cut down while life was still in him. Then the rest of the time-honoured punishment—castration, disembowelling and quartering—was carried out."²

In those days justice had to be reduced to a mockery; on bare suspicion innocent men had often to be sent to their doom; the Government had to put down even the suggestion of treason with an iron hand. Furthermore,

"Not only was the fabric of a case often built up on the allegations of hired creatures of the Government, but the existence of the rack gave a preposterous twist to the words of every witness. Torture was constantly used . . . The Government could prove anything . . . Thus it was that Elizabeth lived her life out, unscathed; and thus it happened that the glories of her age could never have existed without the spies of Walsingham, the damp cells of the Tower,

¹ E. & E., 177.

² *Ibid.*, 89.

and the notes of answers, calmly written down by cunning questioners, between screams of agony."¹

Strachey asks himself how Essex could have been a party to sending the innocent Lopez to his destruction :

"One can understand, perhaps, the intellectuals and the politicians; but Essex! Generous, strong, in the flush of manhood, is it possible that he failed to realise that what he was doing was, to say the least of it, unfair?"²

But Essex's vision was blinded by the glare of political rivalry and the mad whirl of patriotism; and this was the tragic spot on his character. We can now realize that the Lopez episode, while being without question an artistic excrescence, is at least relevant to Strachey's purpose of showing up at once one further anomaly in the Elizabethan body politic and one more contradiction in his hero's character.

Strachey dwells on Essex's execution with a lingering and infectious sympathy. But Essex's doom is merely the prelude to Elizabeth's—and here too we are reminded of *Antony & Cleopatra*. A few more years of life and power are hers surely; but glamour, and hope, and romance, and love are gone for ever :

"So it had all come to this! It was all too clear—her inordinate triumph had only brought her to solitude and ruin. She sat alone, amid emptiness and ashes, bereft of the one thing in the whole world that was worth having. And she herself, with her own hand, had cast it from her, had destroyed it."³

She could romp about with her inseparable sword and thrust it into the tapestry, she could vent her wrath on her waiting-women and reduce them to tears, she could pour out her lamentations in an agony of viperous

¹ E. & E., 79-80.

² *Ibid.*, 87.

³ *Ibid.*, 276.

remorse, she could be a constant prey to temper and incalculable nerves: but the past, too sweet, far too sweet to regret, too bitter, far too bitter to forget, could never materially be recalled. And Elizabeth too, in her grandeur, in her greatness, she too is gathered amidst the shadows.

Elizabeth & Essex was received by the public with guarded adulation. No sooner does the public find a man doing a thing well than it insists that he shall do the same thing in the same way again and again. *Eminent Victorians* had made delightful reading; its sparkle had been mischievously entertaining; its irony had been ubiquitous and destructive. In the literary amphitheatre Strachey had performed an extraordinarily amusing feat, and the overwhelmed crowd wanted him to go on, following the same intricate movements and reproducing the same climax. But Strachey was an artist and he could no more mechanically multiply his studies of eminent Victorians than Shakespeare could manufacture King Lears to order, daughters, madness and all. *Queen Victoria*, a vaster undertaking than *Eminent Victorians*, massed together innumerable precise details, producing on the reader a convincing impression of unity in diversity; it tackled, moreover, a greater variety of emotions. While in the previous book Strachey had ignored sex more or less,¹ in *Queen Victoria* he made a half-hearted attempt to portray love; but the result was nearly a caricature. Whether in the minute recapitulation of the misdemeanours of Victoria's uncles, or in the discussion of Melbourne's composite of femininity and masculinity, or in the microscopic exposure of Victoria's disingenuous

¹ The references to the amours of Tien Wang and the Mahdi need not be taken seriously.

adoration of Albert, or in the treatment of Disraeli's attachment to the 'faery'—everywhere the irony breaks in and withers and dries up the lewdness as well as the ecstasy of love. In *Elizabeth & Essex*, for the first and for the last time, Strachey attempted a portrayal of the emotion of love in all seriousness. Politics, stale stories of personal rivalries rot in the dust-bins of the faded centuries, the iniquities of yesterday are off-set by the more original abominations of to-day—but Love and Friendship, these eternal and immutable verities in our lives, shine like the Golconda of flawless jewels. Strachey tried to interpret Love understandingly, sympathetically, respectfully almost. In the attachment of a virgin of sixty for a youth of twenty-five, the mere ironist might have found ample material for irreverent and indecent laughter; but the virgin is Elizabeth and the youth is Essex, and thinking of them, one is left wondering whether they inhabit the crude world of fact or the paradise in a mystifying day-dream. Strachey had the courage to attempt what he had not cared or dared to attempt before; and he had also the wisdom to eschew alike sentimentalism and melodrama.

The studied restraint in narration, the inimitable brevity in phrasing, the leaving out of everything that is redundant and distracting—these Stracheyan virtues are almost as supremely evident in *Elizabeth & Essex* as in his earlier works. But there is a difference as well. Compared to Victoria, Elizabeth was a far more complex character, she was more indubitably England. But she did not leave any detailed diaries of her thoughts and of her daily activities (as Victoria did); the Creeveys and Grevilles of the Age of Elizabeth were equally disobliging. Strachey had therefore to re-create the personages of

the period imaginatively. The process is exhilarating, for it is the process of poetic creation ; but such a process applied to an historical theme is fraught with dangers. When Strachey praises Elizabeth's personal accomplishments, he is on sure ground :

“Elizabeth's accomplishments were many and dazzling. She was mistress of six languages besides her own, a student of Greek, a superb calligraphist, an excellent musician. She was a connoisseur of painting and poetry. She danced, after the Florentine style, with a high magnificence that astonished beholders. Her conversation, full, not only of humour, but of elegance and wit, revealed an unerring social sense, a charming delicacy of personal perception. It was this spiritual versatility which made her one of the supreme diplomatists of history.”¹

Here Strachey is praising and praying ; there is none of the ‘Little man, what now?’ attitude. But when Strachey tries to probe into the mystery of Elizabeth's life-long virginhood, the sentences are darkly mysterious and radiate a perturbing reality :

“Though, at the centre of her being, desire had turned to repulsion, it had not vanished altogether; on the contrary, the compensating forces of nature had redoubled its vigour elsewhere. Though the precious citadel itself was never to be violated, there were surrounding territories, there were outworks and bastions over which exciting battles might be fought, and which might even, at moments, be allowed to fall into the bold hands of an assailant.”²

Is it an intuitive grasp of the elusive truth, or is it merely an immature imagination running riot? The passage, one must confess, much against one's will, toys inartistically with libidinous imagery, though in its context the blot seems a little fainter.

¹ E. & E., 17-8.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

On a later occasion, Strachey tries, with all his nimbleness and verbal wizardry, to conjure up before our eyes Elizabeth's mental involutions before she decides to have Essex executed. These four pages are Maeterlinckian in their throbbing enactment of 'static' drama: they enchant, they surprise, they shock, they subdue, and they murmur in a plaintive monotone:

"To abolish, in a moment, the immediate miserable past—to be reconciled once more; to regain, with a new rapture, the old happiness—what was there to prevent it? Nothing, surely; she had the power for such an act She could not dwell indefinitely among imaginations; her sense of fact crept forward—insidious—paramount; with relentless fingers it picked to pieces the rosy palaces of unreality. She was standing once again on the bleak rock. She saw plainly that she could never trust him, that the future would always repeat the past, that, whatever her feelings might be, his would remain divided, dangerous . . . a hideous memory struck her; terrible, outrageous words re-echoed in her mind. 'Crooked'—'carcass'—so that was what he thought of her! . . . He had betrayed her in every possible way—mentally, emotionally, materially—as a Queen and as a woman—before the world and in the sweetest privacies of the heart her father's destiny, by some intimate dispensation, was repeated in hers; it was supremely fitting that Robert Devereux should follow Anne Boleyn to the block . . . was this, perhaps, not a repetition but a revenge? After all the long years of her life-time, and in this appalling consummation, was it her murdered mother who had finally emerged? The wheel had come full circle . . . "¹

That is surely a remarkable passage: the Elizabethan subtleties, compound of Hamlet and Iago, impinge and resolve and coalesce into subtler subtleties than ever; and we are bewitched and enthralled. Only when the show is over and the curtain drops, we ask



ourselves : what are the sources of this magnificent piece of psychological reproduction ? Is it the work of an imaginative novelist or that of a conscientious historian ? The less exacting reader, however, does not bother to ask these questions. What does it matter ? Hasn't it all been wonderful, hasn't it been a thrilling experience ? Hasn't one been disarmed by the winged squadrons of the Stracheyan art, by his sheer verbal artistry ? *Elizabeth & Essex* is literature : why argue whether it is not something else ?

CHAPTER VII

THE MINIATURES

'Picture in illuminated manuscript', 'small-scale minutely finished portrait'—these carefully chosen expressions in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* linger in one's mind as the approved definitions of 'miniature' and also as the precise descriptions of Strachey's 'portraits in miniature', those sketches of men and women he had been executing all through his life. In his essay on Aubrey, Strachey remarks :

"A biography should either be as long as Boswell's or as short as Aubrey's. The method of enormous and elaborate accretion which produced the *Life of Johnson* is excellent, no doubt; but, failing that, let us have no half-measures; let us have the pure essentials—a vivid image, on a page or two, without explanations, transitions, commentaries, or padding."¹

Some of Strachey's earliest essays had been, in fact, Aubreyan miniatures, a trifle more elaborate perhaps, and, consequently, a trifle less effective. 'Mademoiselle de Lespinasse' (1906), 'The First Lord Lytton' (1907), 'Lady Mary Wortley Montagu' (1907), and the sketches of Fanny Burney, Mrs. Inchbald, Horace Walpole and Beddoes, interwoven in the criticism of their writings, all belong to Strachey's 'nonage.' 'Madame du Deffand' (1913), which the late Lord Birkenhead chose as one of the 100 best essays, was the first great exhibit in the Stracheyan portrait gallery. 'Voltaire and Frederick' was a dual portrait, forerunner of the Manning-Newman, Gordon-Gladstone, Albert-

Palmerston, Cecil-Essex duets to follow. 'Lady Hester Stanhope' and 'Mr. Creevey', which appeared shortly after the War, are genuine miniatures. In *Eminent Victorians*, *Queen Victoria*, and *Elizabeth & Essex*, Strachey progressively attempted an increasing and elaborate accretion; but in between, he sewed some pretty miniatures also—Hurrel Froude and Keble, Sidney Herbert and Clough, Evelyn Baring and Hartington, Melbourne and Palmerston, Francis Bacon and Tyrone, Cecil and King Philip. At last Strachey would pursue this method of elaboration no longer: it was too exhausting. A miniaturist he began: and a miniaturist he ended. The wheel came full circle; and *Portraits in Miniature*, which is perhaps the very quintessence of Stracheyism, appeared in the year before his death. The posthumous work, *Characters & Commentaries*, brought to light the earlier miniatures and some of the uncollected later ones. Taking all these specimens of Strachey's restricted portraiture into consideration, one wonders if the miniature is not his peculiar *genre*, the one that called forth all his potentialities and realised all its own possibilities. One likes to think of Strachey as the artist who perfected the medium of the miniature portrait, as one thinks of Browning as the poet who most exploited the possibilities of the dramatic monologue. There is, indeed, something uncanny, something curiously brittle, something noxiously vitriolic, and also something deliciously aromatic about these exquisitely chiselled and fragile portraits that stare at us out of oblivion, that smile and moan and whimper and chuckle, that seem to be so fully implicated in our lives and carved almost in the texture of our memories.

Strachey's portraits, like Saint-Simon's, "spring

into his pages bursting with life—individual, convincing, complete, and as various as humanity itself.” Like his French master, Strachey too excelled

“in that most difficult art of presenting the outward characteristics of persons, calling up before the imagination not only the details of their physical appearance, but the more recondite effects of their manner and their bearing, so that, when he has finished, one almost feels that one has met the man.”¹

In the Stracheyan Zoo, the animals are indeed beautifully individualized. Thus Sir John Harington’s was

“a young man’s face, whimsically Elizabethan, with tossed-back curly hair, a tip-tilted nose, a tiny point of a beard, and a long single ear-ring, falling in sparkling drops over a ruff of magnificent proportions.”²

Mary Berry was

“indeed a fascinating relic of an abolished world, as she sat, large and formidable, bolt upright, in her black wig, with her rouged cheeks, her commanding features, and her loud conversation, garnished with vigorous oaths.”³

Froude’s appearance was impressive :

“The height, the long, pale face, the massive, vigorous features, the black hair and eyebrows, and the immense eyes, with their glowing darkness, whose colour—so a careful observer noted—was neither brown, nor blue, nor black, but red.”⁴

As for Dr. Creighton,

“The sharp aquiline face, with the grizzled beard, the bald forehead, and the gold spectacles, gleamed and glistened, the long, slim form, so dapper in its episcopal gaiters, preened itself delighted, as an epigram—a devastating epigram—shot off and exploded, and the

¹ F. L., 150.

² P. M., 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

Fulham tea-cups tinkled as they had never tinkled before."¹

In the bigger biographies also, similar thumb-nail sketches abound. For instance, William IV was

"A bursting, bubbling old gentleman, with quarter-deck gestures, round rolling eyes, and a head like a pineapple... He was one part blackguard, people said, and three parts buffoon."²

As for Robert Cecil, there was

"an urbanity upon his features, some kind of explanatory gentleness, which, when he spoke, was given life and meaning by his exquisite elocution. He was all mild reasonableness—or so it appeared, until he left his chair, stood up, and unexpectedly revealed the stunted discomfort of deformity. Then another impression came upon one—the uneasiness produced by an enigma: what could the combination of that beautifully explicit countenance with that shameful, crooked posture really betoken?"³

It is needless to give any further instances of Strachey's unerring capacity to evoke a human personality by the magical incantation of the physical peculiarities.

Strachey's portraits are essentially dramatic in mould and psychological in temper; and their very life-blood is an irony that ranges the whole gamut from savage satire, passing through wit and humour, and reaching the other end of dissolving pathos. But there is ever a residuum of humour to raise a smile, to force a laugh, to draw forth a too-happy tear. Thus, if one were asked to name the three 'marks' of Strachey as a recorder of human lives, in brief or at length, one might half-hesitatingly mention these: *dramatic intensity, psychological accuracy and relevance*, and

¹ P. M., 212.

² Q. V., 34.

³ E. & E., 106-7.

an irony that is as various as nature. It is the combination of these three qualities that makes the Stracheyan formula the thing of wonder and wild desire it is to the hosts of his unsure and unwise imitators.

All drama subsists on some conflict or other—a conflict on the physical, mental, or spiritual plane. Without a correct knowledge of the workings of the human mind, of the peculiar crevices and the odd juts of pointed rock that disfigure it and complicate its workings, the dramatist can make no headway in his art. There has generally to be a 'hero' and one...not a hero; there has to be, if possible, the hero's party warring against the not-a-hero's (or villain's) party; the hero himself has to fight an inner battle, the two sides of his nature—Dr. Jekyll's and Mr. Hyde's—struggling for mastery; and thus, the exigencies and stringencies of the art require, true drama shall be fashioned. Such an artifice, if it glows into inevitable art and reflects life's significances with poignancy and beauty, is certainly worthy of all praise. It makes for symmetry, for compression, for concentration; and the point the writer has in mind is driven home unfalteringly and almost unknowingly.

Strachey, of course, is not writing 'dramas', properly so called; he is a biographer, a miniaturist, and his medium is narrative prose. But he finds the dramatic methods of antithesis and balance very useful, not only in planning major works like *Elizabeth & Essex* and the sketch of Manning, but even in the incidental minutiae of criticism, comment, and elaboration. Strachey is describing, for instance, the correspondence between Madame du Deffand and Voltaire: clearly, in such a case, the method of antithetical juxtaposition of details cannot but be useful:

"There was no love lost between the two old friends; they could not understand each other . . . She distrusted him profoundly, and he returned the compliment . . . If they had liked each other any better, they never would have troubled to write so well. They were on their best behaviour — exquisitely courteous and yet punctilioiusly at ease, like dancers in a minuet. His cajoleries are infinite . . . She replies in the tone of a worshipper . . . and so the letters go on. Sometimes one just catches the glimpse of a claw beneath the soft pad, a grimace under the smile of elegance; and one remembers with a shock that, after all, one is reading the correspondence of a monkey and a cat." ¹

The careful widening of the abyss between the protagonists, the parenthetical explanations and illustrations, and the clinching assertion of the antinomy by means of a metaphor, 'a monkey and a cat'—and the phrase sticks for ever in one's memory. In the essay on Voltaire and Frederick, again, Strachey gives a dramatically vivid account of the variations in "the pot and the kettle, in strictest privacy, calling each other black."² Another unforgettable metaphor!

Yes, we are amused and edified. The old duels are re-enacted. We watch Pope and Lady Mary exchanging scurrilous couplets; we watch Madame du Deffand and Madame de Lespinasse, coming together, disagreeing, exploding, and then revolving in different orbits altogether; we watch Rousseau and Diderot casting mud at each other, each victim of a delusion and each incapable of understanding himself or his opponent; and we watch the good Dr. Beddoes oscillating between medicine and poetry, and poetry and politics, between the urge to live and the will to die. We come to more recent times:

¹ B. & C., 81.

² *Ibid.*, 150.

"Newly clothed with all the attributes of ecclesiastical supremacy, Manning found himself face to face with Newman, upon whose brows were glittering the fresh laurels of spiritual victory—the crown of an apostolical life ... It was the meeting of the eagle and the dove; there was a hovering, a swoop, and then the quick beak and the relentless talons did their work."¹

And these theses, so concisely stated, are elaborated with a wealth of documentation and illustrative detail; and we watch the show through its suspense and crises, progresses and transitions, till the printed page glows with the thrills and dissolves with the tears of a gladiatorial contest.

It is, however, in reproducing a mental conflict in a character that Strachey shows his greatest sense of the dramatic and his psychological penetration. The formula is there for all time :

"Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.
The Genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of a man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection."²

Such an insurrection does not cease to be terrible because it is invisible; through words, through gestures, through action and through inaction, it reveals the ravages on a rich heart reduced to beggary as in Timon, on a noble instrument jangled out of tune and harsh as in Hamlet. The devil himself, it is said, knoweth not the thought of man; but the poet and the biographer must needs try to unfold the minds of the fictional or real characters they are wrestling with in the throes of artistic birth. It may not be enough for a

¹ E. V. 74.

² *Julius Caesar*, II, 1, 63—69.

biographer to depend on the available, irreproachable materials of diaries and memoirs for effecting a completely credible psychological galvanization of the character. It may be necessary to identify himself with the character, however risky it may be from the stand-point of scientific truth. Catherine, in Emily Brontë's novel, shrieks out the identity, "I am Heathcliff!", and such a fusion, between author and character—momentary though it may be—should have been the prelude to the creation of those supremely palpitating and livid psychological studies in Strachey's works.

Florence Nightingale has come to know of Sidney Herbert—and thus Strachey evokes the scene :

"She took hold of him, taught him, shaped him, absorbed him, dominated him through and through. He did not resist . . . only that terrific personality swept him forward at her own fierce pace and with her own relentless stride. Swept him—where to? Ah! Why had he ever known Miss Nightingale? If Lord Panmure was a bison, Sidney Herbert, no doubt, was a stag—a comely, gallant creature springing through the forest; but the forest is a dangerous place. One has the image of those wide eyes fascinated suddenly by something feline, something strong; there is a pause; and then the tigress has her claws in the quivering haunches; and then—!"¹

It is visualized in pictorial detail—the scene, the meeting, the victim's strange imaginings, even the catastrophe itself. Elsewhere, Strachey tries to reproduce Gladstone's mental gymnastics :

"Others might picture the triumphant rescue of a Christian hero from the clutches of heathen savages; before his eyes was the vision of battle, murder, and sudden death, the horrors of defeat and victory, the slaughter and the anguish of thousands, the violence of military

¹ E. V., 148-9.

domination, the enslavement of a people Oh! it was perfectly clear what General Gordon was doing: he was trying to force the hand of the English Government. He was hoping that if he only remained long enough at Khartoum he would oblige the English Government to send an army into the Sudan which should smash up the Mahdi. That, then, was General Gordon's calculation! Well, General Gordon would learn that he had made a mistake. Who was he that he should dare to imagine that he could impose his will upon Mr. Gladstone? The old man's eyes glared. If it came to a struggle between them—well, they should see! It was like some silent deadly game of bluff. And who knows what was passing in the obscure depths of that terrifying spirit? What mysterious mixture of remorse, rage, and jealousy? Why did not the man come back? He was a Christian hero, was he? Were there no other Christian heroes in the world? A Christian hero! Let him wait till the Mahdi's ring was really round him, till the Mahdi's spear was really about to fall! That would be the test of heroism! If he slipped back then, with his tail between his legs—! The world would judge."¹

How does Strachey know that Mr. Gladstone's fulminations took just this tortuous course? that these, and these only, were the crests and cusps of his reasoning? Has he made it all up—or has he unearthed some new documents? We do not know. In *Queen Victoria*, again, there is a crucial improvisation regarding the young Queen's hesitations on the eve of her marriage:

"It was not the measles that was attacking her, but a very different malady; she was suddenly prostrated by alarm, regret, and doubt. For two years she had been her own mistress—the two happiest years, by far, of her life. And now it was all to end! She was to come under an alien domination—she would have to promise that she would honour and obey someone, who might, after all, thwart her, oppose her—and how dreadful that would be!

Why had she embarked on this hazardous experiment?
Why had she not been contented with Lord M?"¹

That Victoria was a prey to temper and nerves on the eve of Albert's arrival is probable enough; the rest is all a rhapsody on a wintry night, an intriguing piece of fantasy.

Above all, what strikes one in these portraits is their distillation of the essence of a character and a life in a few words, in just an episode or two. That austere intelligence, product of Cambridge and the Classics, perched precariously on the lonely eminence of Bloomsbury, surveys the scene, detects a curious carcase away from the thoroughfare, and itself amused and with intent to amuse others, breathes into the dead thing the Promethean heat that at once relumes the light that had been put out for hundreds of years. Then the rough satyrs, newly imbued with life, dance and play their appointed pranks, parody and caricature their own originals, and help to make the Zoo, in its totality, a kind of lunar synthesis. What kind of world is that, we ask ourselves, where Sir John Harington goes about translating Ariosto and cogitating the reconstruction of the water-closet; where Lodowick Muggleton holds curious converse with the Almighty; where the peregrinating Aubrey regrets the monasteries; where the redoubtable Dr. North's even more redoubtable mother silences the incredible tintinnabulation going on about her son's ears; where the egregious jackass, Collier, tilts at the windmills of dramatic criticism; where Dr. Colbatch meets the terrible Dr. Bentley in a life-long duel; where the Abbé Morellet, an old fogey, sits dozing and nodding, and suddenly denounces

¹ Q. V., 96.

Monsieur Chateaubriand and the ruin of French prose; where Mary Berry, now eighty, dreams of her youthful lover, General O'Hara; where Madame Appony looks a giraffe, and Mr. and Mrs. Creevey press upon the exhausted Sheridan several glasses of French wine with commendable effect. These are extraordinary visitants to this our land of crude reality; their grimaces and their dumb-shows, their taunts and their kow-tows are all alien, and yet—why is it so?—there is the life-force in them somehow, they simply live before us. *Labyrinthodon* or *ichthyosaurus* or neanderthal, each of these has the *élan vital* forced through its nostrils, and every one of the intimates of this Zoo just lives, jabbering and jousting and gesticulating among themselves.

These are happy moments; Strachey is amused and he amuses us. Of John Aubrey:

“He was clever enough to understand the Newtonian system, but he was not clever enough to understand that a horoscope was an absurdity; and so, in his crowded curiosity-shop of a brain, astronomy and astrology both found a place, and were given equal values.”¹

The criticism is apparent in such a passage, but it is expressed indulgently, genially, jestingly, with a kindling sparkle and residuary relish; and we enjoy the fun with the author, no rancour and no malice poisoning our simple enjoyment. But suddenly, the razor glistens, and with delicacy and accuracy, cuts both ways. *Blande suaviterque* many a great man's spirit is refined out of existence. An almost unperceived movement to the left and another to the right, and the poor victim doesn't know which way to turn, or whether it is worth his while

¹ P. M., 24.

to turn any way at all. The misguided, the long-winded, and the dull, the over-scrupulous and the over-intelligent, the unmannerly and the uncompromising, they all must experience the ceremonious touches of the instrument, and they all must be politely and firmly levelled into a glassy smoothness, and, too, a glassy transparency, through which the twists and knots in their character can be exposed to public view. Here is a typical example :

“The Bishop’s imagination was not deeply stirred by the atrocities of the Inquisition; what interested him, what appealed to him, what he really understood, were the difficulties and the expedients of a man of affairs who found himself at the head of a great administration. He knew too well, with ritualists on one side and Kensitites on the other, the trials and troubles from which a clerical ruler had to extricate himself as best he could, not to sympathise (in his heart of hearts) with the clerical rulers of another age who had been clever enough to devise regulations for the elimination of heresy and schism, and strong enough to put those regulations into force.”¹

‘Not *deeply stirred*’, ‘what interested him’, ‘what *appealed* to him’, ‘what he *really understood*’, ‘he knew *too well*’, ‘clever enough’, ‘strong enough’, and the words within the brackets, ‘in his heart of hearts’—how harmless these little flourishes look, but what a desolation they produce in their cumulative effect! Strachey’s attacks against Carlyle’s and Froude’s ethical conceptions² are more direct; and even Hume’s *History of England* comes in for some implicit and sarcastic criticism. But, reassuringly, we are immediately introduced to the kindly old man, and we are permitted to catch

¹ P. M. 216.

² *Ibid.*, 203-5.

"the vision of the mountainous metaphysician seated, amid a laughing party of young ladies, on a chair that was too weak for him, and suddenly subsiding to the ground."¹

Poet, buffoon, or philosopher, historian, vagabond, or prophet, Strachey, after his strange juggleries are over, leaves them human, just human. The biographer knew his business after all.

Sometimes, Strachey allows the characters to grow and evolve before our very eyes; we are allowed to peer through the microscope of his art, and measure the contours, and the evil and good inextricably mixed; and we are held in a hypnotic gaze the while. Thus of Sir Evelyn Baring :

"His temperament, all in monochrome, touched in with cold blues and indecisive greys, was eminently unmantic. He had a steely colourlessness, and a steely pliability, and a steely strength. Endowed beyond most men with the capacity of foresight, he was endowed as very few men have ever been with that staying-power which makes the fruit of foresight attainable. His views were long, and his patience was even longer. He progressed imperceptibly; he constantly withdrew; the art of giving way he practised with the refinement of a virtuoso. But, though the steel recoiled and recoiled, in the end it would spring forward. His life's work had in it an element of paradox. It was passed entirely in the East; and the East meant very little to him; he took no interest in it. It was something to be looked after. It was also a convenient field for the talents of Sir Evelyn Baring. Yet it must not be supposed that he was cynical; perhaps he was not quite great enough for that. He looked forward to a pleasant retirement—a country place—some literary recreations. He had been careful to keep up his classics. His ambition can be stated in a single phrase; it was, to become an

¹ P. M., 152.

institution; and he achieved it. No doubt, too, he deserved it."¹

The brief sentences read alarmingly like the tick-tick-ing of a distant clock; they seem to be ill-assorted together, but as a matter of fact, they are actually driving away the hazy vapour surrounding the idol, revealing it in its utter nudity.

Such a method is almost forbiddingly perfect; and Strachey follows it, even to better advantage, in unmasking Francis Bacon :

"It was not by the juxtaposition of a few opposites, but by the infiltration of a multitude of highly varied elements, that his mental composition was made up. He was no striped frieze; he was shot silk. The detachment of speculation, the intensity of personal pride, the uneasiness of nervous sensibility, the urgency of ambition, the opulence of superb taste—these qualities, blending, twisting, flashing together, gave to his secret spirit the subtle and glittering surfaces of a serpent. A serpent, indeed, might well have been his chosen emblem—the wise, sinuous, dangerous creature, offspring of mystery and the beautiful earth... His mind might move with joy among altitudes and theories, but the variegated savour of temporal existence was no less dear to him—the splendours of high living—the intricacies of Court intrigue—the exquisiteness of pages—the lights reflected from small pieces of coloured glass... Intellect! It was the common factor in all the variations of his spirit; it was the backbone of the wonderful snake."²

In *Elizabeth & Essex*, the discussion takes several pages; and it is the elaborate compliment paid by Strachey to the greatest, wisest, and meanest of mankind. Through parenthesis, platitude, symbol, comparative quotation, circumscription, crisis, and

¹ E. V., 270.

² E. & E., 43-44.

anti-climax—Bacon's individuality is riddled through it all, and the scales are pulled out; but there are yet scales upon scales remaining; the skin shines still, the supple reptile still wriggles through the interstices of Strachey's technique, and it painfully subsists, and invents, perhaps, a new epigram to defend such subsistence!

With Gladstone, Strachey is in difficulties. Evelyn Baring and Bacon, above everything else, were essentially selfish, and they were severely rational creatures; and Strachey's art cannot but succeed in interpreting them. But Gladstone was a very different phenomenon—a tantalizing mixture of emotion and intellect:

“Was Mr. Gladstone, perhaps, a chimera of the spirit? Did his very essence lie in the confusion of incompatibles? His very essence? It eludes the hand that seems to grasp it. One is baffled, as his political opponents were baffled fifty years ago. The soft serpent-coils harden into quick strength that has vanished, leaving only emptiness and perplexity behind. Speech was the fibre of his being...The long, winding, intricate sentences, with their vast burden of subtle and complicated qualifications, befogged the mind like clouds, and like clouds, too, dropped thunderbolts...In spite of the involutions of his intellect and the contortions of his spirit, it is impossible not to perceive a strain of *naïveté* in Mr. Gladstone... Compared with Disraeli's, his attitude towards life strikes one as that of an ingenuous child. His very egoism was simple-minded: through all the labyrinth of his passions there ran a single thread. But the centre of the labyrinth? Ah! the thread might lead there, through those wandering mazes, at last. Only, with the last corner turned, the last step taken, the explorer might find that he was looking down into the gulf of a crater. The flame shot out on every side, scorching and brilliant; but in the midst there was a darkness.”¹

¹ E. V., 265.

Nowhere else, perhaps, has Strachey found the necessity to crowd so many metaphors and similitudes—serpent, cloud, thunder, labyrinth, a single thread, crater, flames, darkness—in order to interpret one human being. We, too, as we read this exquisite verbal sword-play, we too are fascinated; and we too realise that the discussion, calling forth, all the while, fire and brimstone from the imperishable spheres of rhetoric, has only led us to a darkness.

In trying to unfold Prince Albert's character, Strachey is in his most reasonable mood, gently leading us, soberly, confidentially, and surely; and we are made to realise that his conclusion is the only one possible :

“The causes of his melancholy were hidden, mysterious, unanalysable perhaps—too deeply rooted in the innermost recesses of his temperament for the eye of reason to apprehend. There were contradictions in his nature, which, to some of those who knew him best, made him seem an inexplicable enigma: he was severe and gentle; he was modest and scornful; he longed for affection and he was cold. He was lonely, not merely with the loneliness of exile but with the loneliness of conscious and unrecognised superiority. He had the pride, at once resigned and overweening, of a doctrinaire...To dominate and to be understood! To conquer, by the same triumphant influence, the submission and the appreciation of men—that would be worth while indeed! But, to such imaginations, he saw too clearly how faint were the responses of his actual environment...the seeds of pessimism, once lodged within him, flourished in a propitious soil. He

‘questioned things, and did not find
One that would answer to his mind;
And all the world appeared unkind.’

He believed that he was a failure and he began to despair.”¹

¹ Q. V., 182-3.

There are no fireworks, no dark abysses and strange similes, in this passage; even the quotation is from Wordsworth in one of his divine moments. The quiet clarity of this passage is no less a triumph of Strachey's art of psychological abstraction as is the side-tracking subtlety in the Evelyn Baring or intellectual glow and verbal brilliance in the Gladstone and Bacon passages.

We have talked about Strachey's miniatures—their descriptive perspicuity, their anecdotal fun, their psychological penetration, their individual pugnacity, their collective approximation to a Zoo. If there is one reason, more than any other, why a biography may be preferred to an autobiography, it is this: in the biography we can also read about the death of our hero, whereas an autobiography must stop short of the author's death. A biographer has to describe his hero's death, and interpret it, explicitly or by necessary implication, as a fulfilment of life or a frustration of it or a purposeless accident in it. Strachey's characters die strange deaths; death is as various as life itself; and he describes it every time with a minute and loving particularity. The oft-quoted (and hence here not to be quoted) last paragraph in *Queen Victoria* tries, in an inimitable way, to reincarnate the Queen's dying thoughts that merge into one another, that recede "back and back, through the cloud of years, to older and ever older memories." Besides being an artful collocation of significant episodes and experiences in Victoria's life, it has the rhythm and ring of poetry, and has the fulness and finality of a valid summary of the whole book. Whether Victoria really had all those thoughts in the secret chambers of consciousness at the moment of her

death is a problem that should offer a wide solution; and, in fact, this is tactfully admitted by Strachey in the saving 'perhaps' that starts off the last two sentences in the paragraph. In this particular instance Strachey is making the fact of death an occasion for writing poetry.

The late Alice Meynell, in one of her whimsical essays, argued against the biographer giving an undue importance to the fact of death. In nature there is death every moment and everywhere: but Nature manages to hide the carcases somehow, to turn them even into something else, fresh and living. But, she protested,

"the biographers have always had other ways than those of the wild world. They will not have a man to die out of sight...there never is a modern biography that has taken the hint of Nature."

Strachey, one feels, not only has not taken Nature's hint, but he seems actually to revel in death. Not for nothing has he admired the author of *Death's Jest-Book!* This may be the macabre constituent of Strachey's art: but it is of a fearful vitality and runs to the core of Stracheyism. Death—that is always the end, unescapable, unalterable; with it our revels are to close indeed; with it the towering romanticism of a Disraeli and the quivering fanaticism of a Gordon are both to be chilled and destroyed; death is so vast that one merges in it *for ever*. "Dr. Arnold had passed from his perplexities *for ever*"; Aubrey's "journeyings were ended *for ever*"; Gibbon "dozed again, and became unconscious—*for ever*"; Victoria understood that she had lost her husband "*for ever*". No wonder Strachey was allured by death's magnificent

eternity: life is only for a brief *now*, but death is *for ever!*

Strachey was allured by death; but he was also discomfited by its persistent tricks: death is the supreme irony of our lives! Mademoiselle de Lespinasse, in the twilight of her glory and fame,

"sank into the arms of d'Alembert, thanking him tenderly for that long kindness, that unalterable devotion; then, begging from him some strange forgiveness, she seemed, for a moment, to be struggling to an avowal of unutterable things. The ghastly secret trembled; but it was too late."¹

And Elizabeth, with the lion heart and the splendid gestures, with the glaring eyes and terrible demeanour and the sweeping draperies—"a haggard husk was all that was left of Queen Elizabeth." Essex himself, the last of the barons, whom Shakespeare placed nearly on a par with the victor of Agincourt—he died at the executioner's hand.

Death is certainly the end—and "death once dead, there is no more dying then!" But, sometimes, the hour of death may be a rejuvenation of a vanished grandeur: as Madame de Lieven was dying, the old Guizot was at her bedside:

"she begged him at last to leave her—to go into the next room for a little. He obeyed, and she was dead when he returned to her. She had left a note for him, scribbled in pencil—'Je vous remercie des vingt années d' affection et de bonheur. Ne m'oubliez pas. Adieu, Adieu.' At the last moment, with those simple and touching words, the old grandeur—the original essence that was Dorothea Benckendorf—had come into its own again."²

¹ C. & C., 113.

² P. M., 137.

The death of Madame de Sévigné was an unimaginable and catastrophic event: "The source of order, light, and heat was no more; the reign of Chaos and Old Night descended."¹ And the most touching of all the death-scenes is Dr. Colbatch's:

"His head turned; he was old, haggard, dying. Tossing on his bed at Orewell, he fell into a delirium; at first his mutterings were inarticulate; but suddenly, starting up, a glare in his eye, he exclaimed, with a strange emphasis, to the utter bewilderment of the bystanders, '*Arrogat, my lord!*' and immediately expired."²

This raises a sad smile—but it is more allied to tears.

No; Strachey would not follow Alice Meynell's advice and imitate Nature. He would rather state the problem of death squarely; he would, again and again, describe how his characters—a Duke of Kent, a Princess Charlotte, a King Philip, a Dr. Lopez, a Prince Albert—embarked upon their final voyage; and we might, if we will, have a perception of the utter futilities of living, as all living is but the brief prelude to unconquerable death, to "the mystical whirlpool of the unknown, and the long quietude of the grave."³

¹ P. M., 57.

² *Ibid.*, 69.

³ B. & C., 216.

CHAPTER VIII

IRONY IN STRACHEY'S WORKS

Why does one remember, with affection and with gratitude, Strachey's biographies and portraits in miniature? They are undoubtedly worth studying for the information they give; but that is not their sole interest, nor yet their major interest. One reads them, and lovingly remembers them, because they give delight no less than light, because their manner of presenting facts is as important as the facts themselves. The biographies and the miniatures, the essays in criticism and the literary surveys, even the stray reviews and dialogues are delightful and reminiscently exhilarating, and have a common personality in spite of the variety in subject matter and literary *genre*. It is a dangerous, unaesthetic enterprise to try to isolate the spirit from the matter, for the fusion of 'Stracheyism' with the material content it inhabits and illumines is as close as can be imagined. *A profound scepticism in thought, a painstaking clarity in expression, and a pervasive irony in both*—these may be said to be the characteristic essences that, igniting in the presence of a Francis Bacon or a Dr. Arnold or a Madame du Deffand, cast a luminous enchantment around; and in the place of gloom and darkness there is happiness and light.

"All irony", says the late Sir Walter Raleigh, "criticises the imperfect ideas and theories of mankind, not by substituting for them other ideas and other theories less imperfect, but by placing the facts of life, in mute comment, alongside of the theories."¹

¹ *Essay on Don Quixote.*

By the exhibition of the fancied truth and the crude reality side by side, we are made disagreeably conscious that our cherished expectations miscarry, and thereby we are made to reform ourselves, if we can and if we will. Irony in Strachey's writings is an ubiquitous thing, inseparable from the other constituents of his art. It allies itself, off and on, to humour, to wit, and very occasionally, to sarcasm ; it is part and parcel of the point of view that defines the clear outlines of the portraits ; it is the justification of, and is itself justified and glorified by, Strachey's prose style. This irony works from different attitudes and from different altitudes as well. But it is always mute criticism : facts are stated without comment, but in such a way that the implied criticism is more eloquent and effective than any denunciation or invective can hope to be.

Let us take a typical passage :

"In 1820, a fortune-teller had told him, two members of the Royal Family would die. Who would they be? He speculated on the various possibilities: the King, it was plain, could not live much longer; and the Duchess of York had been attacked by a mortal disease. Probably it would be the King and the Duchess of York; or perhaps the King and the Duke of York; or the King and the Regent. He himself was one of the healthiest men in England. 'My brothers,' he declared, 'are not so strong as I am; I have lived a regular life. I shall outlive them all. The crown will come to me and my children.' He went out for a walk, and got his feet wet. On coming home, he neglected to change his stockings. He caught cold, inflammation of the lungs set in, and on January 22 he was a dying man."¹

This is a little slice of life, delicately humanised by a pervasive but unobtrusive irony; the pathos and the

illusion of human certitudes are at once suggested ever so insinuatingly. Here is another passage, shot through and through with the slippery velvet of Strachey's irony :

"As she watched her beloved Albert, after toiling with state documents and public functions, devoting every spare moment of his time to domestic duties, to artistic appreciation, and to intellectual improvements; as she listened to him cracking his jokes at the luncheon-table, or playing Mendelssohn on the organ, or pointing out the merits of Sir Edwin Landseer's pictures; as she followed him round while he gave instructions about the breeding of cattle, or decided that the Gainsboroughs must be hung higher up so that the Winterhalters might be properly seen—she felt perfectly certain that no other wife had ever had such a husband. His mind was apparently capable of everything, and she was hardly surprised to learn that he had made an important discovery for the conversion of sewage into agricultural manure . . . 'All previous plans,' he said, 'would have cost millions; mine costs next to nothing.' Unfortunately, owing to a slight miscalculation, the invention proved to be impracticable."¹

At one stroke, Strachey has made both Victoria and Albert look rather foolish; he has exposed them, in their integrity as well as in their absurdity. Irony has here done its work, playing with the tools of selection of trivialities, illustration, and shattering anti-climax.

Mr. Edwin Muir has differentiated between two recurrent moods of irony in Strachey's works. These are

"the consciously ironical in which he satirises the pretensions and hypocrisies of men, and the involuntarily ironical in which he sees the drama of existence as a transitory, illusory process which has happened so often that now it has but an apparent reality."²

¹ Q. V., 164.

² *Transition, essay on Lytton Strachey.*

In *Queen Victoria* both these moods are revealed. In it the irony is a continuous stream, now spiring its sparkle at us, and anon ingratiating its meaning into our hearts. The instances of ironic antithesis are intricately dovetailed into the vivid narrative: Victoria was a constitutional sovereign and tried to discharge her duties with scrupulous care—and yet she tried to interfere with the policy of her ministers; she was very devoted to the memory of Albert and was eager to perpetuate it—and hence she caused books to be published about him, representing him as a wooden image of virtue; she loved to read poetry—that of Scott; she loved acting—but preferred the plot, especially that of a farce; she read novels—but disliked George Eliot, though she admired lesser female writers; she was the issue of her mother's second marriage—but she was opposed to widow remarriage; and so forth and so on. There are other levels of irony, too, in the book. This visible symbol of the Victorian Age was in several important respects hopelessly unattached to it. In religion, in science, in social reform, in industry, England made great headway during the Age; but Victoria understood none of these things. The increase in her prestige during the last years of her reign was off-set by the steady diminution in her executive power; the friend of the Whigs of the Thirties became the staunch supporter of the Tories of the Eighties and Nineties; a foreign prince, with no interest in politics, directed England's destinies better than any of her own princes had done.....The Duke of Kent's cocksureness about his health was an illusion; Lord Melbourne's hopes about a rejuvenation of personal power were an illusion; Gladstone's impeccable reticence and Disraeli's fervent devotion were

alike illusions. Progress itself is an illusion. We deceive ourselves and we deceive others; and, in the last resort, nothing really matters.

Elsewhere the irony is more direct and biting. The imaginary dialogue between Bonga-Bonga and an English Cabinet Minister is a case in point.¹ Strachey could never understand official interference with any aspect of personal liberty. Whether one is persecuted for his religious opinions, or his aesthetic tastes, or his immorality, the evil is the same; it is the assertion of the majority's right to oppress and crush the minority. In his controversy with Professor Gilbert Murray, carried on in *The Spectator*, on obscenity in literature, Strachey expressed himself in uncompromising language. If Professor Murray should appeal to Caesar, said Strachey, to Caesar let him go; but Caesar's authority is not only edged, but double-edged; it could be made to uphold a strict Puritanism in literature as also a free libertinism. Aristophanes, Rabelais, Shakespeare—theirs is the authority of Caesar; but they seem, at times, to revel in talking about dirt.² In the outspoken essay entitled 'Avons-nous Changé Tout Cela?' Strachey discussed the shifting positions of intolerance in England:

"If a man wears unusual clothes, we hate him with the hatred of a Franciscan for a Dominican in the fourteenth century. If he goes so far as not to wear black clothes at dinner, we are quite certain that he is doomed to eternal perdition; while if he actually ventures to wear no clothes when he bathes, we can stand it no longer and punish him by law... The spirit of intolerance may be hunted out of ethics as it has been from metaphysics; and then where

¹ 'Bonga-Bonga in Whitehall' in C. & C.

² The argument has been summarised from memory.

will it take refuge? Obviously, in aesthetics; and, indeed, after the late fulminations of Sir Walter Richmond against Post-Impressionism, nobody could be very much surprised if a stake were set up to-morrow for Mr. Roger Fry in the courtyard of Burlington House."¹

Had Strachey really looked fifteen years into the future and seen what was to happen to Miss Radclyffe Hall and the late D. H. Lawrence?

At other times, Strachey's irony, by juxtaposing two antithetical courses of action, utters its implied impeachment:

"On Newman's death, Manning delivered a funeral oration, which opened thus:—'We have lost our greatest witness for the Faith, and we are all poorer and lower by the loss . . .' In private, however, the surviving Cardinal's tone was apt to be more . . . direct. 'Poor Newman!' he once exclaimed in a moment of genial expansion. 'Poor Newman! He was a great hater!'"²

In the Gordon essay, again, we read:

"Though he was too late to take part in the capture of the Taku Forts, he was in time to witness the destruction of the Summer Palace at Pekin—the act by which Lord Elgin, in the name of European civilisation, took vengeance upon the barbarism of the East."³

Civilizing zeal and vandalism were never united more pathetically! The thrust is sharp—but not undeserved.

"Impartiality," says Mr. Edwin Muir, "is one of Strachey's chief virtues. Every stroke of irony in his book is weighed not for its effectiveness but for its justice; and accordingly every stroke tells."⁴

For instance, Strachey mentions, without comment:

¹ C. & C., 166.

² E. V., 106.

³ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴ *Transition*.

"It was observed that the Queen's protracted privacy not only cast a gloom over high society, not only deprived the populace of its pageantry, but also exercised a highly deleterious effect upon the dressmaking, millinery, and hosiery trades. This latter consideration carried great weight."¹

Even the lashing of Gilbert Scott is, perhaps, justified by the facts :

"Mr. Scott found it necessary to recruit for two months at Scarborough, 'with a course of quinine.' He recovered his tone at last, but only at the cost of his convictions. For the sake of his family he felt that it was his unfortunate duty to obey the Prime Minister; and, shuddering with horror, he constructed the Government offices in a strictly Renaissance style."²

The irrelevant reference to 'a course of quinine' makes this more a pert missile than a valid criticism of life; and Scott himself is caricatured rather than portrayed. However, examples like this, where the ironist is lost in the caricaturist, are fortunately few and far between in Strachey's writings.

On the whole, Strachey's irony is a permeating, pleasing phenomenon, lifting its head where one least expects it, eliciting our approbation, tantalising us, archly taking us aback. He is the twentieth century Voltaire.³ In simple, very simple, even monosyllabic words, Strachey could, if he wanted, make the whole complexity of his meaning clear. Essex has returned unbidden from his Ireland expedition and Elizabeth has decided to let him off leniently—and this is Strachey's comment :

¹ Q. V., 199.

² *Ibid.*, 206.

³ Aldous Huxley, *On the Margin*.

"Never was the cool paternalism of the Tudors so curiously displayed. Essex was a naughty boy, who had misbehaved, been sent to his room, and fed on bread and water; and now he was to be brought downstairs, and, after a good wigging, told he was not to be flogged after all."¹

The metaphor is carefully and elegantly worked out; and we know that here the ironist is chastened into a kindly and lovable humorist.

¹ E. & E., 227.

CHAPTER IX

STRACHEY'S STYLE

However we tackle the problem of the fascination exercised by Strachey's works, we are bound to come at long last to a consideration of his style. To say that Strachey's style is generally limpid and that one has no difficulty in understanding his meaning is to reiterate what is only too obvious. The French classicists had been Strachey's masters; and in England he had worshipped at the shrines of Pope and Horace Walpole. "Order, lucidity, balance, precision—the great classical qualities—dominate his work."¹ But this metallic clarity and sustained simplicity are the result of a most studious art. In Mr. C. E. Montague's words :

"The words have been picked, sifted clean and put into tune; they have taken on colour; abstract description has become incarnate in sensuous images; the great escape has been made from mere intellectualism, with its universals and essences, to concrete particulars, the smell of human breath, the sound of voices, the stir of living. To do all this is work, work intoxicantly delightful to the right man for it, but still work, shouldered by the writer and not left to the reader to plug away at, if he can and will."²

And Strachey himself asks :

"Is it possible...to bring forth anything that is worth bringing forth, without some pleasure—whatever pains there may be as well—in the parturition?"³

It is obvious, therefore, Strachey has enjoyed writing every bit of what he has written; and it is equally

¹ P. M., 161.

² *A Writer's Notes on His Trade*, 1923.

³ P. M., 190-1.

obvious that the beauties of his style merely bear witness to his infinite capacity for taking pains.

In his earliest published essay we find Strachey already thrashing his devoted victim in the competent and vigorous style of his maturity :

“ ‘Vauvenargues,’ we find in Miss Lee’s Introduction, ‘understood the art of writing, as an art, scarcely at all.’ He understood it better than Miss Lee, whose English is never good . . .”¹

The fact is, the soul of Strachey’s prose style, with its lucid outline and material strength, its innate sparkle and pervasive irony, is fully alive in his earliest no less than in his latest writings. As the years passed, the sparkle dazzled more and the irony wounded deeper. But the difference between the style of ‘Two Frenchmen’ and that of ‘Creighton’, written twenty-five years later, is one of degree, not of kind. How with maturity Strachey achieved greater compactness in expression is seen from these two extracts, one from an essay written in 1906 and the other in 1914 :

“The conflict and torment of the religious struggles into which the whole energies of the Renaissance had been plunged, were over; the infinite agitations ushered in by the French Revolution had not yet begun . . .”

“The agitations of the reign of Anne were over; the stagnation of the reign of Walpole had not yet begun . . .”

They both say more or less the same thing, and yet how much more gem-like is the maturer concoction ?

So, too, for sheer power of writing, one might compare Strachey’s splendid portrait of Mademoiselle de Lespinasse (1906) with his even more splendid portrait of Madame du Deffand (1913) :

"Mademoiselle de Lespinasse, inspiring and absorbing all, was the crowning wonder, the final delight. To watch the moving expressions of her face was to watch the conversation itself, transmuted to a living thing by the glow of an intense intelligence. 'There is a flame within her!' was the common explanation of her friends . . . "¹

"Madame du Deffand herself had a most vigorous flow of language . . . the sparkling cataract swept on unheeding. And indeed to listen was the wiser part—to drink in deliciously the animation of those quick, illimitable, exquisitely articulated syllables, to surrender one's whole soul to the pure and penetrating precision of those phrases, to follow without a breath the happy swiftness of that fine-spun thread of thought. Then at moments her wit crystallised; the cataract threw off a shower of radiant jewels, which one caught as one might . . . "²

The style of his later works, *Elizabeth & Essex* and *Portraits in Miniature*, here and there betrays dangerous cracks. Dots and dashes are made to do, one fears, far too much work. Its extreme suppleness shows inevitably signs of disintegration. But, till the last, Strachey managed, almost miraculously, to preserve the normal framework of prose while exploiting to the full its utmost possibilities.

To one who has read even a page or two of Strachey, his liberal use of adjectives must appear at first extraordinary. Ideas seem to be effectively stifled under the load of unwanted adjectives :

"the spectral agony of an abolished world is discernible through the tragic lineaments of a personal disaster."

"the weak-willed youth who took no interest in politics and never read a news-paper had grown into a man of unbending determination whose tireless energies were

¹ C. & C., 106.

² B. & C., 78.

incessantly concentrated upon the *laborious* business of government and the *highest* questions of state . . . ”

“Like a dram-drinker, whose *ordinary* life is passed in *dull* sobriety, her *unsophisticated* intelligence gulped down his *rococo* allurements with *peculiar* zest . . . ”

“*interminable* periods of *episcopal* oratory . . . ”

“the *fulminating* accompaniments of his *most agitated* rhetoric . . . ”

“spider’s web of *delicate* and *clinging* diplomacy . . . ”

So obvious is this riot of adjectives that Mr. Charles Smyth sarcastically asks: “Is it a vein of effeminate timidity that makes it almost impossible for him to use a noun without qualifying it with an adjective?”¹

It is no doubt possible to shorten these sentences by omitting the adjectives. But the result would be, not simplicity—but inanity. Now and then even Strachey nods—but we are not to judge him by his palpable failures. Generally speaking, the adjectives are seen to be very appropriate indeed. If we take away ‘indefatigable’ from: “His father’s first wife had been a natural daughter of her own indefatigable Sire,”² we also take away the intended sting. If, again, we prefer to read the following without the adjectives—

“An eye of icy gaze is turned upon the *tumultuous* secrets of passion, and the pangs of love are recorded in the language of Euclid . . . ”³

“that voice is silent now for ever, and the Terror and the Pity that lived in it and purged the souls of mortals have faded into *incommunicable* dreams”⁴—

¹ *The Criterion*, July 1929, 655.

² P. M., 1.

³ B. & C., 231.

⁴ C. & C., 278.

it can only mean that we are willing to forego their clinching enormity of suggestiveness. And doesn't the following sentence read a tame, insipid thing, once deprived of the adjectives?

"The *wily old* King whispered into the *chaste* ears of Guizot the key to the secret; he had good reason to believe that the Duke of Cadiz was incapable of having children, and therefore the offspring of Fernanda would inherit the Spanish crown . . . "¹

The adjectives constitute no superficial adornment—but are indeed integral with the texture of the expression. They have been chosen not haphazard but after the most careful deliberation with intent to qualify, beautify, or destroy.

Next to the use of adjectives, Strachey's tactful association of trivialities, the deliberate adding of one small detail to another strikes his reader as an important stylistic peculiarity. We are told that in the carriage of the Duke of Kent there were "the Duchess, her daughter Feodora, a girl of fourteen, with maids, nurses, *lap-dogs* and *canaries*."² The Duchess of York was a lady "who rarely went to bed and was perpetually surrounded by vast numbers of *dogs*, *parrots*, and *monkeys*."³ Strachey describes at length Victoria's dolls and the preserved mementoes of the past, her "commemorative cravings" clustering ever more thickly, her curious methods of "circumventing the obliterating influences of time." But seemingly trivial as are the details, they are vital to the complete picture; they are the stray lines and dots, individually useless, even ugly, that in their totality produce a

¹ Q. V., 136.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

perfect composition. A chance remark, an extract from a diary, a shrewd guess, a contemporary broadside, an apocryphal story, a forgotten minor episode, a physical malformation, the particulars of the menu, the inventory of a room, the turns in a bygone conversation, the ravings during a delirium, the vagaries of costume, the varieties of death—all these are woven together into the woof of a vigorous and fascinating style.

Sometimes Strachey makes stylistic capital out of the repetition of certain key-words. In his essay on Shakespeare's Final Period, Strachey quotes Caliban's outburst :

/ "You taught me language, and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse,"

and then adds ironically : "Is this Caliban addressing Prospero, or Job addressing God? It may be either; but it is not serene, nor benign, nor pastoral, nor 'On the Heights.'"¹ It is the parting fling at Professors Dowden and Furnivall. 'His spirit must be crushed!'—the words are used in connection with Newman again and again, each time doing more connotative damage. Referring to Madame de Lieven's tactlessness towards the Queen, Strachey says that the "individual felt she *had made a mistake*"; a page or two later, the same words are applied to King Leopold: "Like poor Madame de Lieven, his Majesty felt that he *had made a mistake*."² Again, Strachey notes that during her visit to Paris, Victoria exclaimed: "Strange indeed are the dispensations of Providence"; and he concludes the very next paragraph with—"the dispensations and

¹ B. & C., 56.

² Q. V., 66, 68.

ways of Providence continued to be strange.”¹ Macaulay is damned as a Philistine and is, at last, redeemed even as a Philistine. The prophecy that Dr. Arnold would, and the statement that he did, “change the face of education all through the public schools of England” are given respectively in the first and last but one paragraphs in the essay on Dr. Arnold. But, sometimes, the words are repeated with the softness of a refrain :

“Warm-hearted, responsive, she loved *her dear* Lehzen, and she loved *her dear* Feodora, and *her dear* Victoire, and *her dear* Madame de Späth. And *her dear* Mamma . . . of course, she loved her too . . . ”²

Strachey repeats also expressions or single words from the diaries and letters of Victoria, Gordon, Beddoes, Walpole, and other characters, and thereby enlivens his pages. ‘Lord M.’, ‘dear Albert’, ‘pious Martin’ . . . the words are significantly repeated; “laughs till she shows her gums”³ is a deliberate echo of Creevey’s remark quoted earlier; and by means of such subtle, inoffensive echoes, the links in the narrative are forged closer. These are like the obscure but indispensable screws in a complicated mechanism. When Strachey does not overdo the artifice, the repetitive elaboration is seen to acquire a serpentine, incantatory magic, with delicate overtones and undertones, and the reader cannot help succumbing to the intricate seductiveness of it all.

Two other Stracheyan mannerisms ought to be mentioned here. The first is his irritating sententiousness. The narrative is suddenly brought to a halt, often at

¹ Q. V., 175.

² *Ibid.*, 23.

³ *Ibid.*, 60.

the most intriguing moments, and we are made to wade through sentences like—

“there is no respite for mortal creatures. Human relationships must either move or perish. When two consciousnesses come to a certain nearness the impetus of their interactions, growing ever intenser and intenser, leads on to an unescapable climax. The crescendo must rise to its topmost note; and only then is the preordained solution of the theme made manifest.”¹

“Life in this world is full of pitfalls: it is dangerous to be foolish, and it is also dangerous to be intelligent; dangerous to others, and, no less, to oneself.”²

“No human creature can ever hope to be truly just; but there are degrees in mortal fallibility, and for countless ages the justice of mankind was the sport of fear, folly, and superstition.”³

“How subtle and how dangerous are the snares which fate lays for the wariest of men!”⁴

“How delightful to weave plots, change policies, and direct the fate of Europe in learned antitheses and elegant classical allusions!”⁵

What is the artistic purpose of these platitudinous asseverations—or is there any? They are rather like the disconcerting intervals in an Indian Cinema Theatre when we are shown the advertisements we have already seen ever so often and thereby our interest in the drama itself is held in an unquiet suspense. By their very obviousness, their patent commonplaceness, these sentences give some necessary relief to the swift shift of events in the narrative. Irritating as they undoubtedly

¹ E. & E., 6.

² *Ibid.*, 44.

³ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴ Q. V., 181.

⁵ E. & E., 93.

are, these platitudes have yet their own sweet uses; they function as an opiate to sober and quieten the agitated reader.

A similar explanation may also be offered in defence of another of Strachey's mannerisms—his frequent uses of clichés. 'At the height of', 'it was touch and go', 'unparalleled animosity', 'redoubled fury', 'unfortunate consequences', 'unspeakable woman', 'hectic hero', 'terrifying pause', 'shattering scene', 'polished off', 'wretched pittance', 'hideous fiasco', 'tremendous wigging', 'profoundly shocked', 'appalling silence', 'gross prejudice', 'roundly declared' . . . such clichés are legion; and certain adjectives like 'fascinating', 'peculiar', 'odious', 'strange', 'extraordinary', 'incredible', 'curious', 'wondrous' and such as invoke bewilderment, surprise, or strength abound in his writings. It is easy to dismiss Strachey's use of clichés as a symptom of the poverty of his linguistic resources; but it would be a very superficial judgement. On the contrary, these familiar words and phrases that have been done to death in our daily conversation are precisely the dummies necessary to blunt, now and then, the cutting knife-edge of the underlying meaning in Strachey's sentences. As it is, the sentences, with their colloquialisms and clichés, come to us with the friendliness of a conversation. The same Strachey who seems to take the line of least resistance by resorting to the clichés is also an adept in forming original and suggestive combinations of words. We repeat to ourselves verbal concoctions like "the ramifying generalities of her metaphysical disquisitions", "the illimitable pretensions of the humblest priest in Rome", "the meroilessness of a mediaeval monk", "the mysterious manifestations of the indwelling God", "the ineradicable

iniquities of the slave-trade", "veering moods and dangerous restoratives", "deeper dread of the world's contaminations", "wondrous microcosms of tragedy", "delirious trance of death", "devastating coruscations" and we permit ourselves the luxury of admiring their exquisite balance, their trite phrasing, their supreme contextual relevance.

Strachey's use of the rhetorical question and impersonal construction is another characteristic of his style. Now and then he surprises his readers with questions like 'What was to be done?', 'What indeed?' 'Was it possible?', 'Could all this be true?', 'What was passing in her head?', 'If?', 'In what resides the most characteristic virtue of humanity? In good works? . . . In the creation of beautiful objects?'. This artful posing of questions produces the illusion that the reader is somehow on terms of intimacy with the author, and even with the characters. Similarly, the casualness of impersonal constructions like 'it was clear', 'it was whispered', 'it was rumoured', 'it was noticed', 'people said', and 'it was suggested' is intended to lull the reader into a sense of somnolent security. Here is an example of Strachey setting the "dunce's cap on the head of public mentality":¹

"It was everywhere asserted and believed that the Queen's husband was a traitor to the country, that he was a tool of the Russian Court, that in obedience to Russian influences he had forced Palmerston out of the Government, and that he was directing the foreign policy of England in the interests of England's enemies . . . it was whispered that the Prince had been seized, that he had been found guilty of high treason, that he was to be committed to the Tower. The Queen herself, some declared, had been

¹ Boas, *Lytton Strachey*, 18.

arrested, and large crowds actually collected round the Tower to watch the incarceration of the royal miscreants."¹

If the posing of questions and the peppering of impersonal constructions make the transitions and curves in the narrative more easy and vivid, and the diction itself more conversational and familiar, Strachey's feeling for the innate absurdity of certain names creates various little islets of pure comedy in the otherwise staid and even levels in the writing.

"The very names of the scholars of those days had something about them at once terrifying and preposterous: there was Graevius, there was Wolfius, there was Cruquius; there were Torrentius and Rutgersius; there was the gloomy Baron de Stosch, and there was the deplorable De Pauw."²

Some one edited Hesychius in order to confound Dr. Hody; when Dr. North was ill, the great Dr. Lower was consulted, but it was a pity Dr. North, for all his learning, had not heard of Diaforius; Victoria had three secretaries, Phipps, Grey and Biddulph; she spent a night in the Castle of Lord Breadalbane, and, of course, she paid a visit to Bothie at Alt-na-guithasach. There were others also — Wegg-Prosser, McChyne, Mrs. Shuttleworth, Brother Drithlem, Mr. Odo Russell, Mr. Klupp, Walrond, St. Gundleus . . . there really is no end to the odd fish Strachey has landed.

Another of Strachey's artifices is the exploitation of the anti-climax. After drugging the reader into a sense of complacency, Strachey suddenly administers a rude rattle; the sting in the tail painfully makes itself

¹ Q. V., 154-5.

² P. M., 61.

felt. It almost seems that Strachey can never make a categorical statement but that its base should be cut away by an anti-climax; this is apparently Strachey's most fruitful source of irony :

"Once more Bentley was summoned to Ely House. Dr. Colbatch was on tenterhooks; the blow was about to fall; nothing could avert it now, unless—he trembled—if the Bishop were to die again? But the Bishop did not die; in 1734 he pronounced judgment; he deposed Bentley. So, after thirty years, a righteous doom had fallen upon that proud and wicked man. Dr. Colbatch's exultation was inordinate; it was only equalled, in fact, by his subsequent horror, indignation, and fury . . . "¹

"And so the tenacious woman, hoarding her valuables, decreed their immortality with all the resolution of her soul. She would not lose one memory or one pin."²

"She despatched a letter to Mr. Delane, the editor of *The Times*, asking him if he would 'frequently *write* articles pointing out the *immense* danger and evil of the wretched frivolity and levity of the views and lives of the Higher Classes.' And five years later Mr. Delane did write an article upon that very subject. Yet it seemed to have very little effect."³

It is all smooth and slippery; and as one is seemingly titillated by it, one's feet slip, one rolls down the inclined plane and one crashes at the bottom.

Still another artifice is Strachey's occasional tendency to making overstatements or understatements. Of Voltaire :

"If all that that great nation had ever done or thought were abolished from the world, except a single sentence of

¹ P. M., 68-9.

² Q. V., 254.

³ *Ibid.*, 235.

Voltaire's, the essence of their achievement would have survived." ¹

It is not the literal truth but an agreeable overstatement. Elsewhere Strachey says that "the historian of Literature is little more than a historian of exploded reputations"; ² here the point is made by resorting to the trick of understatement. Nor is all this an artistic blemish necessarily, for, as Mr. Montague has reminded us :

"High lights, half lights, low-lights—all are useful in painting, and so are statement, overstatement and understatement in letters. Given a congenial context, every one of them is right." ³

Whenever Strachey uses expressions like 'unparalleled', 'never before', 'unexampled', 'unprecedented', one just feels a little incredulous; when one reads that Dr. Johnson is "never right", one is tickled but not taken in; one knows these are trenchant ways of saying things, not scientifically precise statements. Strachey is not being insincere; he is only allowing for a minute his enthusiasm to have the better of his reason.

Use of adjectives, association of trivialities, exploitation of clichés, rhetorical questions and impersonal constructions, anti-climax and the repetition of key words, overstatement and understatement—these are Stracheyan artifices, delicately blended with his art and yet capable of separate scrutiny. Strachey has been very occasionally guilty of overdoing these things and reducing his potent art to the level of caricature or journalism : "The bias, no doubt, gives a spice to the

¹ F. L., 181.

² B. C., 121.

³ *A Writer's Notes on His Trade*, 87.

work, but it is a cheap spice — *bought, one feels, at the Co-operative Stores.*”¹ This is unnecessarily pert; so is the pointless gibe at the Albert Memorial:

“The statue was of bronze gilt and weighed nearly ten tons. It was rightly supposed that the simple word ‘Albert’, cast on the base, would be a sufficient means of identification.”²

So is the ponderous and flippant reiteration of the word ‘Trinity’ in sketching the portrait of King Philip. It is even possible, as Mr. Smyth has done, to give examples of grammatical mistakes in Strachey’s writings.³ But these exceptions, and these aberrations, merely prove the rule that, taken in mass, Strachey’s art exploits these artifices with commendable restraint and, ultimately transcending them, becomes a living and glowing organism, with many facets and many radiations.

Style, to-day, in the hands of people like Mr. T. S. Eliot and Dr. Richards, is fast becoming a bare, anaemic thing, often devoid of love and devoid of life. But certain prose writers have yet courageously asserted the right to use words both in their logical as well as their imaginative senses, to use them as mechanical substitutes for ideas and also as charmers, chasteners, chastisers, friends, lovers. Among this select number are Mr. Llewelyn Powys, Mr. Tomlinson, Mr. E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence and Lytton Strachey. Mr. R. L. Megroz points out that

“Lytton Strachey’s rhetorical manner in an epoch when suspicion of the ornate has been carried past all reasonable

¹ P. M., 204-5.

² Q. V., 208.

³ *The Criterion*, July 1929, 655.

bounds, will probably prove to be his chief, at least his most influential, quality as a prose writer."¹

Mr. Megroz's is an overstatement, but nevertheless it contains a germ of truth; the rhetorician in Strachey should not be ignored in the critic or biographer. Rhetoric can be made a cheap and futile thing, verily the harlot of the arts; but, in Strachey's hands, it has a dash and a sweep, and holds one enthralled and enslaved. One such passage—one of several in his works—is the fine peroration at the end of the portrait of Melbourne:

"The man of the world who had been the friend of Byron and the Regent, the talker whose paradoxes had held Holland House enthralled, the cynic whose ribaldries had enlivened so many deep potations, the lover whose soft words had captivated such beauty and such passion and such wit, might now be seen, evening after evening, talking with infinite politeness to a schoolgirl, bolt upright, amid the silence and the rigidity of Court etiquette."²

Imagination, intellect, scholarship, a sense of values, a quiet sense of humour, they all fuse into the formation of such rhetoric. At other times, Strachey's imagination crystallizes; a simile or metaphor is jerked out of the solution, and we can examine it with lingering fascination:

"Into that frothy sweetness his subtle hand had insinuated a single drop of some strange liquor—is it a poison or is it an elixir of life?—whose penetrating influence will spread and spread until the remotest fibres of the system have felt its power."³

"At times, in this Berlin adventure, he seems to resemble some great buzzing fly, shooting suddenly into

¹ Introduction to Mr. Bower-Shore's *Lytton Strachey*.

² Q. V., 57.

³ B. & C., 108.

a room through an open window and dashing frantically from side to side; when all at once, as suddenly, he swoops away and out through another window which opens in quite a different direction, towards wide and flowery fields; so that perhaps the reckless creature knew where he was going after all."¹

A word, a thing—Lady Stanhope's nose, the Duke of Kent's clock, Dr. Creighton's black bag, Manning's hat, Albert's green-shaded lamp, Stockmar's gout, the phrase '*Mettetelo lì!*'—are transformed into symbols, evocative of enormous suggestion. The sentences seem to explore the regions of a poetic symbolism and we vaguely conclude that more is meant than actually meets the ear. Are these words—we ask helplessly—or are they cauldrons seething with an urgency of spiritual vapour? Are they veracious descriptions of fact, or are they perturbing symbolist poems, emanations of an infallible intuition? Again and again, we watch the struggles of the departing spirit, and its agonies and exultations. The wriggles of a soul, its lacerations, its languishings, its persistent longings, are portrayed with admirable subtlety and charm; and so too with its riotous intoxications! Resurrecting from the limbo of the past fascinating literary curiosities like Creevey and Muggleton and Sir John Harington; enabling us to watch the discomfiture of the redoubtable Voltaire himself at the hands of the *Président de Brosses*; recalling the faded magnificence of the Age of Louis XIV or of the Augustan Age or of the Age of *baroque* with its lion heart and splendid gestures, or the vulnerable placidities of the Victorian dispensation, till they all throbbed into glorious or absurdly livid life; bringing to our homes and to the secracies of our

¹ B. & C., 149.

hearts the humanity and the grandeur and the mystery of a Racine, a Sir Thomas Browne, a William Blake—to watch Strachey performing these feats through the medium of his style is to acquire an increasing zest in life and letters, and to see and live the past, with its glories and its regrets, through the enchantment of his art.

CHAPTER X

STRACHEY AND THE VICTORIAN AGE

Strachey was not, strictly speaking, a historian at all; he did not attempt to deal in the abstract with the current of human destiny during the Victorian or any other Age. He was primarily a biographer, interested in men and women, and in their feelings and their doings. But, nevertheless, he claimed that in *Eminent Victorians* he had attempted, "through the medium of biography, to present some Victorian visions to the modern eye."¹ The visions presented were indeed haphazard, as he admitted they were, since in themselves they constituted no substantiation of a theory about the Victorian Age. However, they did encourage people to form their own hasty opinions about the Age whose children the 'Eminent Victorians' had been and to condemn Victorian education, religion, politics, and warfare from a partial knowledge of some of the Victorians. When, presently, Strachey published *Queen Victoria*, it was inevitable that his rendering, not merely of the chief characters but by implication of the contours of the great Age itself, should have become the subject of an acute controversy. Other miniature portraits—on Froude and Carlyle, Morley and Macaulay, Beaconsfield and the first Lord Lytton, Creighton and Matthew Arnold—made people further speculate on Strachey's general attitude towards the Victorian age. It seemed to many quite obvious that his attitude was one of calculated antipathy towards that Age. It was thought further that

¹ E. V., *Preface*.

he was in large measure responsible for the unfortunate post-War belittlement of the various characters on the Victorian scene and of the Age itself. From this it seemed natural to deduce two important corollaries: firstly, that the Victorian Age had never before been assailed; and, secondly, that the post-War generation, taking its cue from Strachey, has been unanimous in castigating the Age or damning it with faint praise. Consequently, to some Strachey appeared to be the brightest of the Bright Young Men amusing himself and others by making faces at the gods of yesterday; and to others, for that very reason, he became an ogre desecrating the nation's deep-rooted sentiments in the very holy of holies. It is useful to ask ourselves, and to attempt an answer to, the questions: what do we mean by the Victorian Age? what aspects of Victorianism Strachey attacked in his writings? how did the Victorians themselves react to the manifold ills of their times? what role has Strachey played in the crystallization of our present opinion of the Victorian Age?

The Victorian Age may be said roughly to begin with the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832 and to end with Queen Victoria's death in 1901, thus covering a period of about seventy years. The accident of a girl-queen ascending the throne of England and living to a ripe old age has given the name 'Victorian' to an epoch that saw more changes socially, economically, and politically than any other period in English history. At one end, England was merely one of the European powers, slowly recovering from the effects of the Napoleonic wars, and trying to adjust herself, half-unconsciously, to the fast changing conditions in industry. At the other end, England was the mistress of a great Empire, richer and more populous than ever

before; and London was the hub of international commerce and the cultural metropolis of the world. The miracle—for such it must appear to us at first—was not wrought overnight. Our one chance of understanding the Victorian Age lies in realising that it was in fact three ages in one, the dividing landmarks being 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition, and 1874, the last year of Gladstone's first administration. The earliest of these three periods was still an age of transition and the latest was already an age of slow but sure disintegration; the middle years of Victoria's reign, on the contrary, were a period of security and strength, confidence and self-satisfaction. Attacks against Victorianism are thus normally neither appropriate to the agitations and experiments of the early, nor the stagnation and vacillations of the late Victorian period, but only to the two decades in the middle when the country was ruled efficiently on Whig-Liberal principles, when Dickens and Thackeray, Tennyson and Arnold, Huxley and Darwin were the leaders and organisers of public opinion, when England was really first among the great nations of the world.

What exactly, then, did Strachey say about the Victorian age? Stray remarks are scattered in his essays and biographies. Sometimes the criticism is merely implied, at other times it is specific and trenchant. In his essay on Carlyle, there is a characteristic passage that seemingly sketches “the background of a most peculiar age”:

“an age of barbarism and prudery, of nobility and cheapness, of satisfaction and desperation; an age in which everything was discovered and nothing known; an age in which all the outlines were tremendous and all the details sordid; when gas-jets struggled feebly through the

circumambient fog, when the hour of dinner might be at any moment between two and six, when the doses of rhubarb were periodic and gigantic, when pet dogs threw themselves out of upper storey windows, when cooks reeled drunk in areas, when one sat for hours with one's feet in dirty straw dragged along the streets by horses, when an antimacassar was on every chair, and the baths were minute tin circles, and the beds were full of bugs and disasters.”¹

It was a *most peculiar age*; and the whole passage is merely an amplification and illustration of the thesis. Earlier in the same essay Strachey contrasts the Victorian spirit with the spirit of post-War England :

“the Napoleonic wars, the industrial revolution, the romantic revival, the Victorian spirit, had brought about a relapse from the cosmopolitan suavity of eighteenth-century culture; the centrifugal forces, always latent in English life, had triumphed, and men's minds had shot off into the grooves of eccentricity and provincialism. It is curious to notice . . . today the return once more towards the Latin elements in our culture, the revulsion from the Germanic influences which obsessed our grandfathers, the preference for what is swift, what is well arranged, and what is not too good.”²

Not that Strachey uncritically glorified the present-day. He referred, witheringly, in his survey of English letter-writers, to

“our obsession business, . . . of our express trains, our quick lunches, all our hasty, concentrated, conscientious acts . . . The twentieth century has learned to cultivate its garden so well that it makes a profit of ten per cent. The eighteenth century cared less for the profit and more for the garden.”³

¹ P. M., 193.

² *Ibid.*, 181-2.

³ C. & C., 12-13.

Strachey clearly disliked the present-day only a little less than the Victorian Age. As for the Elizabethan Age, it at once allured and disgusted him; he was frankly puzzled, though also dazzled by its innate and innumerable contradictions. Strachey's adoration was reserved for the eighteenth century. There is a brilliant peroration singing its glories in the essay on Voltaire and England :

"There was a great outburst of intellectual activity and aesthetic energy. The amazing discoveries of Newton seemed to open out boundless possibilities of speculation; and in the meantime the great nobles were building palaces and reviving the magnificence of the Augustan Age, while men of letters filled the offices of State. Never, perhaps, before or since, has England been so thoroughly English; never have the national qualities of solidity and sense, independence of judgment and idiosyncracy of temperament, received a more forcible and complete expression. It was the England of Walpole and Carteret, of Butler and Berkeley, of Swift and Pope. . . . Nor was it only in the high places of the nation's consciousness that these signs were manifest; they were visible everywhere, to every stroller through the London streets—in the Royal Exchange, where all the world came crowding to pour its gold into English purses, in the Meeting Houses of the Quakers, where the Holy Spirit rushed forth untrammelled to clothe itself in the sober garb of English idiom, and in the taverns of Cheapside, where the brawny fellow-countrymen of Newton and Shakespeare sat, in an impenetrable silence, over their English beef and English beer."¹

Strachey would fain live there—or in the France of Louis XIV; but he was temperamentally out of tune with the present and even more with the immediate past, the Victorian Age.

¹ B. & C., 106.

Strachey's attitude towards the Victorian Age was that of the "cold and youthful observer."¹ "That singular epoch!"—he had written in the Preface to *Eminent Victorians*; and elsewhere he has remarked:

"It has the odd attractiveness of something which is at once very near and very far off; it is like one of those queer fishes that one sees behind glass at an aquarium, before whose grotesque proportions and sombre menacing agilities one hardly knows whether to laugh or to shudder; when once it has caught one's eye, one cannot tear oneself away."²

Since 1914, when he wrote this sentence, Strachey found it impossible to "tear himself away" from the Victorian Age. It was *odd*, it was *peculiar*, it was *singular*; and these initial impressions inevitably coloured, however slightly, his portraiture of the Age and of its chief characters.

Strachey was certainly not blind to the sources of its authentic greatness. But he believed that

"its incoherence, its pretentiousness, and its incurable lack of detachment will always outweigh its genuine qualities of solidity and force."³

In another essay he remarks:

"The Victorian Age, great in so many directions, was not great in criticism, in humour, in the realistic apprehension of life. It was an age of self-complacency and self-contradiction. Even its atheists . . . were religious."⁴

The religious atmosphere fills Lord Morley's *Recollections* and "blurs every outline"⁵; Carlyle's true

¹ C. & C., 187.

² *Ibid.*, 187.

³ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

gift for history "was undone by his moralisations"; Froude's "ethical conceptions, though they were not quite so crude, belonged to the same infantile species as his master's".¹ The Victorian's intelligence was at variance with his faith; and both were opposed to his practical ideals. Passionate earnestness, seriousness, solemnity²—these were the three deadly Victorian virtues; and Strachey had no sympathy for any of these things. In *Queen Victoria* he writes sarcastically :

"she was no longer Lord M.'s pupil: she was Albert's wife. She was more—the embodiment, the living apex of of a new era in the generations of mankind. The last vestige of the eighteenth century had disappeared; cynicism and subtlety were shrivelled into powder; and duty, industry, morality, and domesticity triumphed over them. Even the very chairs and tables had assumed, with a singular responsiveness, the forms of prim solidity. The Victorian Age was in full swing."³

Strachey could admire *rusé* cynics, unconventional characters like Melbourne, Palmerston, Disraeli. But the typical Victorians—Peel and Gladstone, Arnold and Tennyson, Cobden and Bright—believed in taking themselves and the world in which they lived very seriously indeed. And in Strachey's view, much of the work of the average Victorian was practically futile since it was unilluminated by self-criticism or detachment.

Coming to particulars, Strachey tried to expose Victorian religion through Manning and Creighton. Of Manning :

'He belonged to that class of eminent ecclesiastics—and it is by no means a small class—who have been

¹ P. M., 188, 204.

² *Victorian Tragedy*, Chap. XIV, esp. 126-7.

³ *Q.V.*, 123-4.

distinguished less for saintliness and learning than for practical ability."¹

Of the Church of England :

"Pure piety, it cannot be denied, has never been her Church's strong point. Anglicanism has never produced—never could produce—a St. Teresa. The characteristic great men of the institution—Whitgift, Hooker, Laud, Butler, Jowett—have always been remarkable for virtues of a more secular kind: those of scholarship or of administrative energy."²

But Strachey knew, and could admire, the true religious in Newman, in many of the originators of the Oxford Movement. Of Victorian criticism Strachey had a very poor opinion; he vehemently contested the critical assumptions of Dowden, Furnivall, and Israel Gollancz; he gently remonstrated with Leslie Stephen and John Bailey; and he poured ridicule on Matthew Arnold. Of the historians of the age, Strachey dealt with Macaulay, Froude, Carlyle, and Creighton, and while admiring certain things in each of them, he could not accept the claims of any of them to be a supreme historian. Education, Strachey thought, had been twisted into a wrong shape by the pertinacity of Dr. Arnold. Art, evidenced in things like the Albert Memorial or the Great Exhibition, or as practised by Gilbert Scott, could not rouse Strachey's enthusiasm either. Even politicians like Gladstone seemed too serious and incapable of taking a fairly detached view of men and affairs. Complacent and credulous, the "Eminent Victorians", the Age itself, evoked at once Strachey's amusement and intense antipathy.

But it would be wrong to suppose that before

¹ E. V., 1.

² P. M., 207-8.

Strachey there had been no criticism of Victorianism. It is worth remembering that the Victorians were laughing at themselves, haranguing to themselves, even uncompromisingly condemning themselves, since the very dawn of Victorianism. Choice spirits were not wanting who wished to rouse their countrymen from their misguided or evil ways. Led by Newman, Keble, and Pusey, the Tractarians early sounded the note of revolt in the sphere of religion. The novelists fearlessly exposed some of the patent injustices of the times. In novel after novel Dickens made it quite plain that all was not well with the Age; with a minute particularity he exhibited, in novels like *Oliver Twist*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *Hard Times*, the iniquities of the Poor Law, the conditions in the squalid towns, and the dangerous growth of plutocracy. Charles Kingsley came forward to give a realistic account of slum-life in England and was generally sensitive to the religious and political movements of his day. Charles Reade, in his *It is Never Too Late to Mend*, powerfully described the harrowing conditions in Victorian jails. And Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or the Two Nations* revealed to what depths of misery industrialization and *laissez faire* had reduced the poorer classes.

Nor were the poets more blind to Victorian injustices and evils. Tennyson himself, the darling of middle-class England, almost forgetting his main theme in *Maud*, poured scorn on the rabid materialism and vacillating policies of his age; and the lyric "Ring out wild bells to the wild sky", with its series of fervent desires, was by no means the utterance of a man feeling that everything was quite all right in the best of all possible worlds. Thomas Hood and Mrs. Browning were painfully alive to the crude horrors of industrialism. And, later

in the age, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Aesthetes, the Mystics and the Muscular poets, in different ways, tried to escape somehow from their unsavoury Victorian surroundings. Even the obscure Father Gerard Manley Hopkins was at the time writing in his 'Tom's Garland' :

"rare gold, bold steel, bare
In both; care, but share care—

This, by Despair, bred Hangdog dull; by Rage,
Manwolf, worse; and their packs infest the age."

Hopkins was aware of the prosperity of the Commonwealth as a whole; but he felt poignantly for the poor who were no better than outcasts from it and had "neither security nor splendour."¹

Matthew Arnold, again, great as a poet and as a prose writer, loudly denounced the 'barbarians' and the 'Philistines' who had given their hearts away a sordid boon; and, on the positive side, he exhorted his countrymen sedulously to cultivate Sweetness and Light and to be votaries of 'Culture.' 'The stern child of Ecclefechan,' Thomas Carlyle, even more loudly attacked the false idols of his day, and bitterly exclaimed: "These be thy Gods, O Israel? And thou art so willing to worship,—poor Israel!"² He firmly believed that Victorian society, possessed by Mammon-worship, was threatened with an early disintegration; and he tried to inject into it the *elan vital* necessary for its survival. To him the remedy seemed to lie in going back to a government of souls by the Church as it had functioned in Abbot Samson's time! On the contrary, John Ruskin, in more kindly and lulling

¹ *Letters of G. M. Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, O. U. P., 273-4.

² *Past & Present* (Everymans Edn.), 53.

accents, drew before his countrymen, whose sense of the beautiful had been blunted by the familiar odious sights in the newly-risen cities, vivid pictures of nature's munificence; and he also spoke thrillingly of the treasures of art in Europe with a divination that few had possessed before. Finally, Frederick Harrison, writing in 1882, gently pricked a few of the gorgeous bubbles of Victorian self-adulation and plainly posited the question if, granting its phenomenal prosperity and progress on the material plane, the Victorian Age were really wiser, nobler, or happier than previous epochs.¹

These were some of the serious writers who boldly criticised what they considered to be the sore spots on the very civilization in whose midst they lived and moved and had their being. But there were others who adopted a different strategy in attacking the follies and foibles, and also the vices and cruelties of the age. There was that "daemonic imp"², Samuel Butler, the author of *Erewhon*, the *enfant terrible* of the age; he attacked religion as well as Darwinism; he seemed to suggest that crime may be reformed by the 'straighteners' but that sickness should be made penal; he warned people that the fast multiplying machines would one day tyrannise over them and reduce them to naught; he hinted that popular religions may, after all, be built on a morass of lies or on a piece of innocuous fiction. His *Erewhon* and the posthumously published *The Way of all Flesh* were in effect an indictment of the Victorian Age. Under cover of describing the Erewhonians, he was merely giving his countrymen a few unpleasant home-thrusts. The

¹ *The Choice of Books*, 418, 424.

² P. M., 212.

snobbishness and complacency of the missionaries, the futility of what passes for education, the crudities of science and religion, the evils of industrialism and urbanisation, man's parasitism on machinery, the tyranny of the family and the home, all these were exhibited with ruthless candour in his books. Another brilliant satirist, W. H. Mallock, in his *The New Republic*, attempted to turn the opinions of Walter Pater, Matthew Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin and other 'intellectuals' of the Age inside out; and the fare he provided was very delicious indeed. His target was the Victorian "intellectual world . . . with the ghost of the Prince Consort as a sort of perpetual President."¹ On the other hand, William Schwenck Gilbert, in collaboration with Arthur Sullivan, satirised several aspects of Victorian crudities and credulities in his universally popular operas. *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Patience, or Bunthorne's Bride*, *Utopia Limited* and *Ruddigore* belaboured, though ever so amusingly, the Victorian dragons of false respectability, aestheticism, complacency and snobbishness. And in the last decade of the age, the phenomenon that is George Bernard Shaw occurred in England and, with an unprecedented pertinacity, proceeded to lash the age and ridicule its innumerable pretensions, and, at the same time, to proclaim the gospels according to Ibsen, Nietzsche, Marx, Samuel Butler, and, above all, Shaw. It is unnecessary to continue this list further; but enough has been said to suggest that almost every considerable man of letters and thinker of these prolific seventy years was quite alive to the sores in its body politic

¹ Sir John Squire, Introduction to the Rosemary Edn. of *The New Republic*.

and was trying, each in his own way, to heal those wounds and check the threatened spiritual decay.

Edwardian England was over before it was well set on its feet. The prevailing note was one of overwhelming reaction to almost everything that had connoted 'Victorian.' The early Georgians were content, in the main, to follow in the foot-steps of the Edwardians. Mr. Esmé Wingfield-Stratford thus accurately describes the situation :

"The strenuously cultivated moral earnestness of the Victorians gave place to an equally strenuous cynicism and flippancy. To hitch one's wagon to a star of any sort was an eccentricity that few had the courage to avow . . . The Victorians had exaggerated prettiness, the Edwardians and Georgians made a perfect fetish of ugliness."¹

Those were the days when art explored the regions of the indecorous, when Rupert Brooke wrote 'Menelaus and Helen', when Masefield sought to make poetry out of the "dirty British coaster", when the soul of democracy was stifled by the party bosses, when human aspirations and ideals lacked focus and the 'centre' was everywhere and the circumference nowhere. The Great War completed the process of demoralization that had already infected civilization and sensitive spirits like Lytton Strachey were compelled to question the very potentialities of existence. These lines of Matthew Arnold may be said almost to constitute the quivering confession of an entire generation :

"Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn."

¹ *History of British Civilisation*, 1258-9; also *Victorian Aftermath*, Chap. IV, esp. 154-5.

Strachey thought that the Victorians had sown the wind, and the Georgians had had to reap the whirlwind. In disappointment and disenchantment, in deference to truth, in answer to an inner urge, Strachey examined the records of the Victorians, weighed them, and found them wanting; and he boldly delivered his judgements.

It was not a normal generation. It had come through fire and brimstone and was muttering and cursing. In its eyes the elderly gentlemen who had precipitated the War had a lot to answer for. The days passed in a continuum of sombre reminiscence and insistent interrogation. It was the mood in which Mr. E. T. Raymond wrote:

“Young England thinks lightly enough of the old men who could neither ensure peace nor prepare to make war with vigour. ‘You got the country into this mess; we got it out: we (and not you) are going to have the say in the future.’ Such, in effect, is what the young men are thinking, and what many of them are saying.”¹

Strachey’s studies came opportunely. They did what many wanted to see done and the obvious glitter carried all before it. But all did not notice the sterling honesty and fund of scholarship hidden beneath the sparkle, the seeming irresponsible irreverence. Other detractors of the Age, with more enthusiasm and less scholarship and no discretion at all, began to tilt at the windmills of Victorian falsities and futilities. Presently a few belated Victorians like Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and the Very Rev. William Ralph Inge came forward to defend the Victorian Age. The latter’s Rede Lecture on ‘The Victorian Age’ was delivered soon after the publication of Strachey’s *Queen Victoria* and is,

¹ *All & Sundry* (1919), 10.

in effect, a counterblast to the ever widening ripples that the book and its predecessor had generated in the levels of Georgian thought. Dean Inge was conscious of the fact that the prosperity of the Victorian Age had bred, inevitably perhaps, a literature of complacency ; and he was conscious also that the Victorians had committed blunders enough. All the same he protested :

“Let those who are disposed to follow the present evil fashion of disparaging the great Victorians make a collection of their heads in photographs or engravings, and compare them with those of their own favourites. Let them set up in a row good portraits of Tennyson, Charles Darwin, Gladstone, Manning, Newman, Martineau, Lord Lawrence, Burne-Jones, and, if they like, a dozen lesser luminaries, and ask themselves candidly whether men of this stature are any longer among us . . . let us have the decency to uncover before the great men of the last century ; and if we cannot appreciate them, let us reflect that the fault may possibly be in ourselves.”¹

The pendulum swung once again in the opposite direction ; reaction bred counter-reaction, and, in the manner of the Hegelian dialectic, out of this clash between detraction and eulogy, sober opinion gradually formed in the solvent of painstaking scholarship, and beautifully crystallized. The little ‘Palace Plays’ of Mr. Laurence Housman were evidence of one aspect of this new attitude towards the Victorian Age. Truth was by no means to be suppressed or twisted ; but it may be coloured a little by a generous understanding, by sympathy. The playlet ‘The Anniversary’ deals with a curious fact mentioned by Strachey himself — the Queen ordering that even after Albert’s death his clothes should be daily laid afresh in his room ; but

¹ *Outspoken Essays*, Second Series, 199—200.

whereas Strachey merely raises a smile, Mr. Housman makes his little piece quiver with emotion.¹

Historians, too, are learning to evaluate the Victorian Age dispassionately, achieving further and nearer approximations, to truth. Mr. Wingfield-Stratford and Mr. G. M. Young, especially, have more or less mastered all that can be or need be learned about the Victorian Age. Roughly of Strachey's age, they have yet reacted to the Victorian Age so differently. Mr. Wingfield-Stratford's valuable studies relating to the Age—*Victorian Tragedy*, *Victorian Sunset*, and *Victorian Aftermath*—and his general survey of British Civilization are among the most considerable historical reconstructions of recent times. He is occasionally at pains to correct Strachey's specific "misinterpretations" of the "eminent Victorians."² But he is not blind to the essential tragedy of Victorianism :

"It was just the weakness of the Victorians that they strengthened and improved every part of the building except the foundations—their peculiar sense of decency perhaps withheld them from probing for dry rot in the cellarage."³

Mr. G. M. Young, again, contributed to his *Early Victorian England* a remarkable chapter tracing the evolution of Victorianism till 1867; this chapter he has recently enlarged to cover also the rest of the age and has reprinted it as *Victorian England, the Portrait of an Age*. This is as near a sober and impartial and at the same time humane and scholarly account of the

¹ *The Golden Sovereign*, (1937).

² *History of British Civilization*, foot-notes on pp. 999, 1002, 1023, 1095, and 1126; also *Victorian Sunset*, 61, and *Victorian Aftermath*, IX.

³ *History of British Civilization*, 979.

Age as we are ever likely to get. We are permitted to watch the growth of the Victorian mind from its nonage to its mature and confident strength and its later decline from that remarkable solidity and that sure strength. He notes the humourless seriousness of the Victorians :

“The sermon was the standard vehicle of serious truth, and to the expositions and injunctions of their writers and statesmen the Victorian public brought the same hopeful determination to be instructed, and to be elevated, which held them attentive to the pleadings, denunciations, and the commonplaces of their preachers.”¹

He makes the very shrewd and plausible guess that “introspection within a closed circle of experience was the trouble”² with some of the Victorians like Newman and Dr. Arnold. He locates and finds the clue to the Victorian paradox—“the rushing swiftness of its intellectual advance, and the tranquil evolution of its social and moral ideals.”³ Above all, admirer of the age that he is, Mr. Young yet feels constrained to write at the end :

“That time has left its scars and poison with us, and in the daily clamour for leadership, for faith, for a new heart or a new cause, I hear the ghost of late Victorian England whimpering on the grave thereof. To a mature and civilized man no faith is possible except faith in the argument itself, and what leadership therefore can he acknowledge except the argument withersoever it goes?”⁴

It is very convenient to conclude this brief survey of the vicissitudes of Englishmen’s reactions to Victorianism

¹ *Victorian England*, 15.

² *Ibid.*, f. n. on p. 76.

³ *Ibid.*, 153

⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

on such a note of acceptance and faith—almost allied to prayer.

It is not quite fair to criticise Strachey for his occasional downright talk about the Victorian Age. He too played an important part in the rediscovery of the Victorian mind. By eschewing cant and false sentiment in the domain of appreciation, he made the path of discovery easy. By emphasising the difference between the Victorian Age and the present day, in habits of thought and even of feeling, he indirectly suggested the possibility and desirability or effecting a fusion of the best in the two. The Victorians had criticised their Age, it is true; but they had attacked the economics and politics of the times, and the men themselves only indirectly. Lytton Strachey's butt, on the other hand, was the men—and by "sleight of hand", as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch puts it, he transferred the criticism to the Age itself, that odd, peculiar, singular and most extraordinary age. He snapped—at times even slightly caricatured—the figures and let them suggest the whole baffling complex of the background. Peopled as it was by those seemingly odd and singular creatures, was it any wonder the Victorian cavalcade struck Strachey as an intimate comedy? With his deft, uncanny hands, Strachey combined history and biography with point, and the show almost seemed to illustrate the distraught Macbeth's dictum :

"It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."

But beneath the withering criticism there was also a positive quality. Strachey was, in fact, a moralist as well as an ironist; only, had he been called one, he would probably have concocted a devastating epigram

refuting the charge. Nevertheless, studied minutely, Strachey's historical biographies, and the tenor of his attitude towards the Victorian Age, reveal a fervent belief in human nature, in honest attitudes of mind, in the triumph of the genuine article over the spurious, in the unsullied supremacy of man's mind. Is it far different from Mr. Young's concluding assertion of faith in "the disinterested mind", and in "the lights of argument and reason"?¹

¹ *Victorian England*, 187.

CHAPTER XI

THE OLD BIOGRAPHY AND THE NEW

A biography may be defined as the story of an individual's life in its objective reactions as well as its subjective realizations. Human beings have ever found it difficult to accept the finality of the tomb and have accordingly tried to perpetuate the memory of themselves or of their "dear departed" in various ways—monuments, inscriptions, statues, written records. It would thus seem that the earliest biographies were nothing more than a contrivance for vicarious existence after death. Works like *Harshacharita*, *Rājatdrain-gini* and *Mahavamśa* described kings and their descendants, their wars and their conquests, their prowess and their wisdom. Often foggy supernatural incidents accreted and one felt one was reading fantasies rather than biographies. Similarly, ancient Greek historians like Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon made biography a mere adjunct to history and seemed to look upon men simply as political or fighting machines.

The first great name in the history of biography in Europe is Plutarch. To him biography was the discovery and portrayal of a human soul and not the mere recording of a campaign of conquest. His heroes were human beings first, with human failings and feelings; and they were statesmen and generals only afterwards. As he remarked in his *Life of Alexander*:

"I record, not history, but human destiny. The evidences of vice or virtue are not confined to famous accomplishments; often some trivial event, a word, a joke,

will serve better than great campaigns or battles, as a revelation of character."¹

Sir Philip Sidney's dying offer of a cup of water to another dying soldier was a more signal and enduring triumph on the human plane than his military triumphs, and foolish would be the biographer who fails to record such revealing incidents.

In English literature we find early specimens of rather crude biography in Adamnan's *Life of St. Columba* and Asser's *Life of Alfred*. But it is in the seventeenth century that we find creditable experiments, even achievements, in the art of biography. The character-sketches of Jonson, Earle, and Overbury; biographical collections like *Theatrum Poetarum* and *English Dramatic Poets*; Aubrey's *Short Lives*: they exhibited a remarkable variety of approach to the art of biography. Aubrey, for all the waywardness and brevity of his notes, knew the main business of a biographer; he knew that a biography should be personal, impartial, and interesting to read. It was, however, Izaak Walton's lives of Donne, Wotton, Herbert, Sanderson, and Hooker that, for the first time in English, realised the Plutarchian ideal. Of course, the lives were merely hymns of admiration, panegyric from beginning to end. This criticism is equally appropriate to Sprat's *Cowley*, Rowe's *Shakespeare* and Dr. Johnson's *Richard Savage*: but they are all written with true feeling and in beautiful prose. For the rest, eulogy, often absurdly exaggerated, still infected biographical literature, and the vogue stung Fielding to write the satirical life of Mr. Jonathan Wild, a criminal who had been hanged in 1725.

¹ Quoted in the Introduction to Emil Ludwig's *Genius & Character (Life & Letters Series)*, 13.

Dr. Johnson published *The Lives of the Poets* between 1777 and 1781. It is justly considered an important landmark in the history of biography. In the course of his desultory reading and as a result of his social position as literary dictator of England, he had accumulated a huge mass of information about the lives of the chosen fifty-two poets and he was able to make his criticisms telling and refreshing, if not always unbiassed. He knew quite well that

“the business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestic privacies, and display the minute details of daily life.”

What if this probing into “domestic privacies”, this enquiry into the “minute details of daily life”, should lead to the discovery of something not very complimentary to the ‘hero’? What if this too human curiosity should rub away a little of the polish from the glittering idol? Johnson simply answers:

“If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to be paid to knowledge, to virtue, and to truth.”¹

If Johnson thus laid the emphasis on truth, William Mason’s *Life of Gray* (1775) exploited for the first time one of the most fruitful means of achieving this ideal. He made use of letters, not intended originally for publication, to bring out the character of the man. Six years after the death in 1784 of Dr. Johnson, his friend, James Boswell, published *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, and four years hence, the nearly as beautiful *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*. At one bound Boswell became the author of

¹ *Rambler*, No. 60.

the greatest biography in the English language, perhaps in any language. He had been at work on it for nearly thirty years; it had been his life vocation; and he had been very lucky indeed in his subject. The art of this supreme biographical masterpiece defies analysis. By letting his hero speak a good deal; by grouping around him his friends and dependants and portraying them in miniature; by utilising freely letters written to or by or about his hero; by introducing innumerable anecdotes; by artfully blurring our sense of time; by adopting a certain ingenuousness in narration; by knitting together into a pattern of complex unity the divers bits of incident and dialogue with the ribbon of a running commentary, at once flowing and captivating—these are some of the artifices by means of which Boswell made that marvel in biography. Of his ideal in biography, he wrote in the opening pages of the book, with dignity and courage :

“I profess to write, not his panegyric, which must be all praise, but his life; which, great and good as he was, must not be supposed to be entirely perfect. To be as he was, is indeed subject of panegyric enough to any man in this state of being; but in every picture there should be shade as well as light...”

And he ventured, not vainly, to say that, in his book, Johnson would be seen “more completely than any man who has ever yet lived.”

But Boswell’s method—the last word in perfection in *his* hands and applied to a character with the immense conversational powers of Dr. Johnson—had its pitfalls to lesser artists. It seemed to require merely an accumulation of letters, pictures, or other documents relating to the hero, and a store of anecdotes however gleaned; these are somehow to be put together, and, to

and behold, the great trick is done! As Sir James Stephen remarked:

“Boswell... knew how to extract from every incident of his hero’s life, and from the meanest alike and the noblest of his hero’s associates, a series of ever-varying illustrations and embellishments of his hero’s character... The imitators of this great master have aspired to the same success by the simple collocation of all facts, all letters, and all sayings from which the moral, intellectual, or social nature of the main figure on their biographical easel may be inferred. But in order to truth of effect, a narrator must suppress much of the whole truth.”¹

Boswell referred to his hero’s oddities, vagaries, violences, his queer views on whipping, his habit of counting the lamp-posts on the road, his slovenliness, his ugliness, his dogmatic utterances and domineering ways, the bulls and blunders in his Dictionary, his prejudices and his bursts of ill-temper: but always they only served to portray Johnson’s character in all its humanity and complexity, and, in the end, to make his stature among men more immense. But most of Boswell’s followers misconstrued his aim and misused his technique. And the biographies published during the nineteenth century generally betrayed this fault of overloading the main canvas with irrelevant and confusing details.

There were a few glorious exceptions. Lockhart’s *Life of Scott*, so carefully written, so authoritative and exhaustive, is second only to Boswell’s masterpiece. Thomas Moore, starting with advantages similar to those of Boswell and Lockhart, attempted in his *Letters & Journals of Lord Byron* to give a completely credible portrait of that amazing personality; but he did

¹ *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, (3rd Edn.), 287.

not quite dare to tell the whole truth about Byron for fear of shocking his relations : the result is a readable and useful book that just fails to achieve greatness. There were also the great historical biographies of Carlyle, *Cromwell* and *Frederick*, and that flame-picture of history, *The French Revolution*, that, by their vividness, their attention to detail, their discernment of the underlying historical *motif*, their sheer power of narration, and their capacity to invoke in all their complex grandeur the titanic figures of Cromwell-Frederick, and Danton, set up a new standard in the art. But his smaller studies and miniature portraits of men and women are even more important links in the history of biography. In his lives of Schiller and Sterling, as also in his biographical essays on Johnson, Scott, Burns, and Goethe, Carlyle succeeded in portraying the many-sided humanity of his heroes, without fear or favour. He had almost a fanatical regard for truth, and to the best of his lights he remained true to his ideal in his bigger as well as smaller records of men's lives. Like Saint-Simon before him and Lytton Strachey after him, Carlyle was an adept in describing the physical peculiarities of his characters. His works, including his *Reminiscences*, are full of such descriptions ; often, indeed, they are much more or much less than descriptions : they are either profound interpretations or amusing caricatures. The picture of the "sea-green *Incorruptible*"—

"that anxious, slight, ineffectual-looking man, under thirty ; his eyes (were the glasses off) troubled, careful ; with upturned face, snuffing dimly the uncertain future time ; complexion of a multiplex atrabilian colour, the final shade of which may be pale sea-green"—¹

¹ *The French Revolution*, I (Chapman & Hall), 124.

sticks for ever in one's memory. "One squalidest bleared mortal, redolent of soot and horse-drugs"; "the light thin man; cold, but elastic, wiry; instinct with the pride of Logic; passionless, or with but one passion, that of self-conceit"; and so, in a few quick flashes, the men, their externals and their dark interiors, are illuminated. Danton and Marat, Camille Desmoulins and Charlotte Corday, Mirabeau and Marie Antoinette in *The French Revolution*, not to mention the nearly as numerous figures in *Cromwell* and *Frederick*—these, hundreds of them, are called back to life and they re-live it for our edification and our amusement. "Put Carlyle in your pocket," rightly said Dr. Hal to Paul Kelver; "He is not all the voices, but he is the best maker of men I know."¹

And yet, with all his great natural gifts, Carlyle was never a master of pure biography. His tendency to moralizing on the one hand, and his itch for exaggeration and caricature on the other, considerably coloured and distorted his portraits. His great death scenes again—one remembers the pages that kindle into a strange animation the last moments of Abbot Hugo, of Louis XV, of Mirabeau, of Danton, of Marie Antoinette, of scores of other figures—are wrought with all the art of a born story-teller. And yet the mantle of the prophet suddenly obscures the clear outlines of the story, and the pathos of simple humanity is lost in the riot of Carlylese. A similar weakness also undid the otherwise great historical portraits of Macaulay. Charles II and James II, Marlborough and William of Orange, Clive and Warren Hastings—they are all eloquently described and yet—in the final analysis—

¹ Quoted by W. H. Hudson in his Introduction to *Sartor Resartus* (Everyman's Library).

they fail to move us profoundly on the human plane. Macaulay's Whiggism and his inability to plumb the incalculable depths of sheer humanity made his historical portraits more valuable as adjuncts to history than as records of human beings.

Between the publication of Lockhart's *Scott* in 1838 and of James Anthony Froude's *Carlyle* about forty-five years later, few indubitably great biographies were published. There were, it is true, Mrs. Gaskell's *Bronte*, G. H. Lewes's *Goethe*, and a little letter, Wilfrid Ward's *Newman* and Gosse's *Father & Son*; but these, like Southey's *Nelson*, published much earlier, were isolated triumphs, almost unconnected with the main biographical tradition. The hey-day of the Victorian period, with its cult of Respectability, almost dried up the springs of the true biographical tradition. Conventions were paramount; but, in the Victorian Age, "no one was quite sure what the conventions were"¹; and, hence, to be on the safe side, biography left out as much of the material, however relevant, as was suspected to be not proper enough. Stanley's *Arnold*, Forster's *Dickens*, and several other heroic attempts at biography failed to give, for all their bulk, credible portraits of human beings. Immediate descendants or friends of the deceased individual collected a miscellaneous mass of documents and scraps of information and portraits at various stages; and these were thrown in between the covers helter-skelter and asked to do duty for a Boswellian biography. As Strachey remarked in his Preface to *Eminent Victorians*:

"Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them,

¹ H. J. & Hugh Massingham, Introduction to *The Great Victorians*.

with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design? They are as familiar as the *cortège* of the undertaker, and wear the same air of slow, funereal barbarism."

And, in answer, Mr. Birrell exclaimed :

"Know them indeed! 'Who knows them if not I?'...I can never think of this class of 'standardised biography' without something between a shudder and a groan. Oh, those familiar headings! 'Birth and Parentage' 'School Days' 'The University' 'Early Struggles' 'Choice of a Profession' 'Marriage' 'Foreign Travel', and so on through the dull, devitalising record, until your tired eye rests with an unbecoming joy upon the familiar words 'Ill-health, Death and Characteristics.' Such things promote blasphemy."¹

One of the most imposing of such undertakings was Theodore Martin's *Life of the Prince Consort*, published in five volumes. Personally supervised by Victoria herself, the monumental tomes reiterated, page after page, the manifold perfections of Prince Albert :

"The fatal drawback was that the public did not find that image attractive...Victoria did not understand that the picture of an embodied perfection is distasteful to the majority of mankind. The cause of this is not so much an envy of the perfect being as a suspicion that he must be inhuman.... But in this the public was the loser as well as Victoria. For in truth Albert was a far more interesting personage than the public dreamed...an impeccable wax-work had been fixed by the Queen's love in the popular imagination, while the creature whom it represented—the real creature, so full of energy and stress and torment, so mysterious and so unhappy, and so fallible, and so very human—had altogether disappeared."²

Similarly, the authors of many a "Standard Biography"

¹ *More Ohiter Diota*, 80-1.

² Q. V., 202-3.

or "Life and Letters" vied with one another in reducing the intangibilities of character and the infinite vagaries and varieties of human life into forbidding packages of cotton and brown paper. Statesmen and preachers, poets and schoolmasters, nurses and Field Marshals, all, all seemed so surprisingly alike in their unbelievable perfections. They became abstractions; the 'Lives' of different 'heroes' by different authors ran surprisingly similar courses; and it almost seemed as if 'biography' was an easy algebraical expression, and all one had to do was to substitute some particular value for the variable 'x' and 'y' and automatically calculate the result!

Froude's *Carlyle* was a challenging exception to the general run of Victorian "Standard Biographies." To some it appeared a reconstruction of enthralling interest; to others it was nothing less than an insult to the memory of the Carlyles. Frederick Harrison wrote:

"Truth! truth! what things are done in thy name, as Madame Roland said of liberty. Because a man has written some very extraordinary books, the world craves to know how the writer of them lived. And so they ransack his drawers when he is dead; and every crude word he ever flung upon paper, or growled out in his sulks, is published to mankind... Better cant itself than the washings and offscourings of these pots and pans, where the eminent writer flung the orts of his ill-digested meals."¹

This was, perhaps, typical of sober Victorian reaction to Froude's book. In Strachey's words—

"The Victorian public, unable to understand a form of hero-worship which laid bare the faults of the hero, was appalled, and refused to believe what was the simple fact—that Froude's adoration was of so complete a kind that it

¹ *The Choice of Books*, 187.

shrank with horror from the notion of omitting a single wart from the portrait."¹

The modern reader, however he may regret its prolixity, is willing to include it among the great biographies in the language. Of other similarly elaborate attempts, Trevelyan's *Macaulay* and the much later Festing Jones's *Samuel Butler* are, perhaps, the most successful.

Serious and lack-lustre in tone, mechanical and rigid in form, and prolix and over-elaborate in style, these "Standard Biographies" offended against the major canons of art. However, by their vogue, they gradually created a wide public for biography. People liked to read the lives of the eminent, remembering, perhaps, Longfellow's famous lines :

"Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime;
And, departing, leave behind us,
Footprints on the sands of time."

Strachey's quarrel with these "Standard Biographies" was that they did not *select* their materials, that they had no *design*, and that they had no *detachment*. Strachey wrote in his essay on Macaulay :

"What are the qualities that make a historian? Obviously these three—a capacity for absorbing facts, a capacity for stating them, and a point of view."²

We may take it that these are also the qualities that make the biographer, for all biography is history, though the converse is not true. Materials have first to be gathered with ant-like industry; facts and dates have to be gleaned from diaries, letters, contemporary records, memoirs of friends and relatives; and it may

¹ P. M., 198-9.

² *Ibid.*, 169-70.

be necessary, said Boswell, "to run half over London in order to fix a date correctly." Thus a work of biography should give evidence of sound scholarship, even scientific scholarship. Strachey knew the importance of this and, according to Mr. MacCarthy's testimony, "knew how much there was to be learnt about every subject which he touched."¹ As Mr. Birrell remarked, in his own whimsical way :

"I have sought in vain for any one who, born after January 1st, 1865, had read even one of Dr. Arnold's seventeen volumes or his 'Life', by Dean Stanley, much bepraised as that biography has always been. In Mr. Strachey, it appears, I have at last met my man."²

Harington's *Orlando*, Collier's *Short View*, and other books as obscure have been read by Strachey. And the imposing bibliography at the end of *Queen Victoria* and the plethora of foot-notes in the text give an idea of the extent of Strachey's scholarship.

Thus far about the substance. But a biography is not a forest of facts, a lifeless catalogue of names and dates. It should rather create a personality by transmuting the facts and dates into throbbing life—and this, the method of art alone can achieve by selecting the significant facts in the hero's life, presenting them in a suggestive combination, even toning up the lights and toning down the shadows from motives of convenience and art. Only then the biography would be a triumph as a picture as well as a likeness, as a work of art no less than as a work of scientific accuracy. In dealing with an individual's outer life, his riches, his environment, his activities on the field of battle or the arena of politics, the scientific method may be useful;

¹ *The Sunday Times*, Jan. 1932.

² *More Obiter Dicta*, 84.

but in tracing the vicissitudes of the hero's mental development, the psychological upheavals in his nature, the tormented convolutions in his character, the piercing irradiations of his soul, the suggestive and subtle method of art alone can succeed. The intellect that comprehends should thus be united with an imagination that apprehends with large charity. And the resulting work should be distinguished by freshness and finish like the works of Fontenelle and Condorcet, who have compressed "into a few shining pages the manifold existences of men", excluding "everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant."¹

Materials have to be gathered; they have to be selected and made to fit into a *design*—but on what basis is the selection itself to be made? Here we collide with the creative process itself. A period, or a character in it, vaguely attracts the biographer; he studies all the books and masters all the information relevant to his subject; then, from the vantage position of detachment, he forms his point of view, his particular opinion of the character on the basis of the knowledge he has gathered; he then chooses such of the facts as are most likely to exemplify his view of the character and corroborate his intuition. Thus a point of view becomes quite indispensable to the biographer. Like ether it permeates the various parts of the work, welding them into a whole. But, says Strachey,

"a point of view, it must be remembered, by no means implies sympathy. One might almost say that it implies the reverse."²

From very early times English biographers, Walton not least, have been generous in their praise; indeed,

¹ Preface, E. V.

² *Ibid.*

there has generally been little except praise in their books. To Strachey such an emotional slavery is unthinkable :

"It is not his business to be complimentary ; it is his business to lay bare the facts of the case, as he understands them...dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions."¹

A point of view, then, is not the adulation of a friend, nor the adoration of a son, nor the worship of a fanatical partisan ; it is merely a preliminary integration, on the biographer's intellectual plane, of the accumulated masses of facts and dates ; it is the unifying, synoptic vision that coheres the conflicting details into a convincing personality. Thus, detachment and point of view can go together ; emotional detachment from the subject of the biography gives, indeed, more scope for the operation of the biographer's intellect ; it can sift the facts and fit them into a design, not corresponding to the traditional or popular notion, not as the 'wish' that is father to the 'thought', but in the manner in which the facts naturally arrange themselves when critically viewed as a whole. The biographer's point of view must be implicit in the portrait that he draws, but he should preserve his detachment by keeping his own predilections religiously in the background. And Strachey generally practices what he preaches. As M. Maurois says :

"there is nothing ponderous about Mr. Strachey's method. He does not criticise, he does not judge—he exposes. His procedure is that of the great humorists. The author never appears himself. He walks behind the Queen, behind Cardinal Manning, behind General Gordon; with faithful exactitude he reproduces their gestures and

¹ Preface., E. V.

their tricks of speech and so obtains excellent comic effects.''¹

It is enough to extract a quotation from Victoria's or from Manning's diary, and the unuttered indictment is made manifest. Not that Strachey makes us laugh at his heroes and heroines — rather, it is they who convict themselves of absurdity or stupidity or duplicity or naïve humanity; and recognising in them all creatures who are flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, we give vent to our amusement and to our laughter.

It is, of course, not to be expected that Strachey could always achieve a perfect synthesis of veracity, design, and detachment. There are exceptions, and there are aberrations; Mr. Arnold Lunn has shown that Strachey's life of Manning is unreliable² and, whether one is a Catholic or no, it is impossible not to feel that there, at any rate, Strachey had thrown his detachment to the four winds. It is a brilliant and entertaining portrait — but it is also a biased one. The bias is nothing extraordinary or subtly recondite; it is the natural, even inevitable, bias of an intellectually honest man who has a frenzied and unescapable distrust of the official interpreters of revealed Religion; it is, on the positive side, the faith of one who believes in the simple glory and finality of true devotion and friendship and in the perennial enchantment of the fine arts; it is, in short, the humanistic old wine of Erasmus and Colet in the modernist new bottles of clear-eyed rationalism and science.

As regards the characters themselves, Strachey insisted that they should be looked upon as human

¹ *Aspects of Biography.*, 17.

² *Roman Converts*, Chap. III, (1924).

beings and not as so much inorganic matter fit for laboratory investigation. Victorian biographers had been expected, as many of them actually did, to cast their subjects, however conflicting be the available data, into Theophrastian models of character: the Saintly Prelate, the Sister of Mercy, the Christian General, the model Head Master, the Good Queen, the Prophet of Work, and so on—titles that might have come out of Theophrastus or Earle. The canker of an uncritical personal devotion and filial piety shut out actuality from those laborious biographical concoctions. It may be freely admitted that

“When Strachey rejected the type and regarded the person, he invented nothing new in method; he went back to Johnson, who biographically allowed a person to have a human grocer, instead of a Theophrastian ‘citizen’, as father.”¹

But most Victorian biographers had written their books as though Johnson had never been. It was Strachey who gave the Johnsonian method a new lease of life, nourished it with the diet of a stern discipline in scholarship, and beautified it with the *toilette* of an eclectic art. Strachey realized that since the function of biography is, in Sir Sidney Lee’s words, “the truthful transmission of personality”, and since ‘personality’ is a thing of spirit rather than of matter, biography, however it may hoard together the dry bones of facts and figures with accuracy, can never be the genuine article so long as it is not given significant form and life by the flesh and blood of an artistic conscience.

Accordingly, Strachey just tells stories, tells us of simple human beings and complex human beings, of

¹ George Sampson in the article on ‘Biography’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (14th Edn.)

simple folk who inherit the earth and of complex intellectuals who frustrate themselves; but always men and women are human, the best as well as the worst of them. On May 24, 1819, "a female infant was born", not the Queen of England; the young Elizabeth is just the "agonised girl"; the young Prince Wilhelm (the terrible Kaiser of 1914-18), the eldest of Queen Victoria's grand-children, is described as "a remarkably headstrong child"; Gibbon, the great man, "ate some chicken and drank three glasses of madeira"; on Gordon's table there was an open Bible and an empty bottle; once, when an indiscreet question was put to His Holiness the Pope, "the Holy Father looked much confused and took a great deal of snuff." Such a human approach to his heroes and heroines has been misinterpreted by some people as savouring of wanton disrespect. This is perhaps true enough in a few cases. But, on the whole, we must agree with Mr. George Sampson when he writes,

"those who think that by turning 'characters' into human beings Strachey diminished his subjects understand neither life nor letters."¹

We might have admired, perhaps, from a distance, a monster of virtue; but we understand as one of ourselves a simple human being, and with understanding, we give sympathy and even affection. Reading these veracious and human accounts of eminent men and women, we experience emotions different from Longfellow's; we are no more overawed into submission and do not countenance slavish imitation; we find no idol to worship, nor yet a strong, all-heroic soul to adore. We find only human beings, who, however great in

¹ Article on 'Biography' in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

certain spheres, are kin to the whole world in all others; who are no rigid formulae or systems, but restless, complex organisms, compact of the multifoliate vagaries, virtues, even vices of humanity. And we find such a picture particularly acceptable — and for this reason :

“We ourselves live in an age of doubt and that is why we like to find in the lives of great men that they too have had their doubts and have nevertheless succeeded in achieving something.”¹

Lastly, Strachey has made biography eminently pleasant reading. A modern biography is short, crisp, and entertaining. It has the appeal of a fine work of art. With an unerring sense of what is amusing, Strachey chose any number of titillating anecdotes, odds and ends, to beguile his readers at every hard turning. Naturally, his biographies became best-sellers; but they have also set the pattern of what a good biography should be. They have brought us face to face with men and women, who are none the less human for being met on the printed page. We watch these people live and think and quarrel among themselves, and behave meanly and foolishly and also nobly and wisely; we notice the veriest ‘heroes’ dwindle into senile old fogeys, and we follow the ordinary and humdrum in their progress towards indisputable heroism. But the information is always sugar-coated with entertainment. Reading of the Duke of Kent’s military reviews or of William IV’s “That’s quite another thing!” or Dr. Creighton’s “Where is my black bag?” or of Hume’s being compelled to repeat the Lord’s Prayer and the Belief when he got stuck up in the boggy ground, or

¹ *Aspects of Biography*, 32.

of undergraduate Beddoes ceremoniously cutting the edges of a book with a butcher's knife, or of Elizabeth flaunting her fantastic attire in a very disturbing manner before De Maisse — reading such episodes in the lives of the eminent, we experience a peculiar elation and we feel inexpressibly drawn towards these people. Martial exploits and pride of birth and position and literary eminence are given to few, far too few amongst us ; but the tears and the laughs, the hunger and the thirst, the jollity and the frivolity, the vanity and the egoism, the digestion and the indigestion of all the children of Adam are exactly the same ; and hence it is that such an unflinching assertion of a persistent humanity, anecdote after anecdote, brings about an understanding between the biographer, his subject, and the reader.

The Stracheyan achievement in biography was no fluke ; it was a carefully premeditated affair, at once a challenge to dullness and incompetence, and a homage to the strictest veracity and the most austere art. Strachey knew what he was out to dare and to accomplish ; in the Preface to *Eminent Victorians* — now acknowledged to be the manifesto of the “new” biography — he openly stormed the enemy’s citadel and proudly planted his own flag of conquest. To write a foot-note to history in the form of biography ; to make it an infallible engine for the truthful transmission of personality ; to make it a story, vivid and complete, and with due apportionment of parts ; to make it a source of unfailing pleasure and inner satisfaction to the reader — these were Strachey’s objectives, and, in most of his experiments in biography, he signally succeeded in attaining them. Thinking of *Queen Victoria*, Lord David Cecil remarks : “If our

age has done nothing else, it has bequeathed to posterity a model biography."¹ It is true; since Lytton Strachey occurred in the history of English literature, the art of biography will never again be what it was. The artistic flair of Walton; the analytical brevity of Aubrey; the stern regard for truth of Dr. Johnson; the industry and authority of Boswell; the supreme sense of narrative form of Macaulay; the vivid flashes and phrases and the dramatic intensity of Carlyle; all these seem to have fused together in *Queen Victoria* to form an acute and perfected unity in which the "new" biography is seen splendidly to justify itself. Of Strachey it might be said—what was said of Dryden by his biographer, though in another connection—that he found biography brick and left it marble. Perhaps, even 'marble', pure and perfectly shaped as it is, is too coldly inadequate an image to apply to that alluring and satisfying thing Strachey has made of the art of biography: the crude, amorphous clay of his immediate predecessors has been beaten and hardened into glorious shape, and the cold, marble smoothness is pregnant with celestial fires.

¹ Introduction to *An Anthology of Modern Biography* (Nelson).

CHAPTER XII

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MEDAL

The Stracheyan concoction in biography was obviously such an entertaining, and apparently such an easy, thing that a host of uncritical 'disciples' published biographies with a fatal facility, conforming, as they supposed, to the new biographical formula. "Save me from my friends!" may well have been Strachey's unuttered prayer on being confronted with the pert and flimsy rehashes that pretended to be inspired by his own *Eminent Victorians*. On the other hand, some of Strachey's detractors, who were not slow in announcing themselves, betrayed an incapacity to understand either what Strachey was trying to do or what he had accomplished. Their odd fulminations were often mere beatings in the void; they lacked focus; they betrayed at once an inability and an unwillingness to tackle Strachey and his works with an open mind. It should be a little instructive to recapitulate in this chapter some of the theses of the more important detractors, and try either to explain them away or answer them or simply accept them.

The slogan of most of the detractors was that Strachey was an idol-breaker, or, in expressive American, a "debunker." He was, so to say, a twentieth-century Atticus, who, without sneering, taught the rest to sneer at the mighty, the great and the wise; a shameless titterer; a small man amusing himself, in his littleness, with looking down at the eminent, and asking them superciliously: "Little men, what now?"

We have admitted already that Strachey did present his characters not only as queens and generals and knights, but also as human beings like the most unashamedly human amongst us; that he did allow his Homers to nod, that he did not refrain from mixing a chuckle with a groan, an absurdity with a heroic. The 'eminent' Victorians that he presented appeared less eminent than they had appeared to our fathers and grandfathers, and sometimes not eminent at all in the way 'eminence' had strutted before the Victorians. Sometimes he made us laugh, and sometimes he made us feel ashamed, and sometimes he summoned our anger from the depths. The Victorians were thorough and they were men of energy; but often their colossal undertakings came to nothing or produced misfits and monsters. The 'eminent' Victorians were eminent all right; but they were not all of them equally eminent, and none of them was wholly so.

Even the most uncritical of Strachey's admirers will admit this much. But what follows? Where does the "debunking" come in? Is it "debunking" to tell us that even the most mighty occasionally lost their nerves, that in fact the world does not consist of grandiose monsters of virtue? Prince Albert once did shriek when a girl was led up to him as partner in a dance; Victoria was once preoccupied with dolls and pictures; even Florence Nightingale did once toy with the idea of marriage; the stern and unbending Dr. Creighton did indeed once get rattled on the railway platform: what then? There is no debunking in all this; it is all no more than a veracious account of a soul in its adventures through life. We do not admire it less, but undoubtedly we do understand it a little more. If, then, to "debunk" is merely

to "remove the *false* sentiment from (person, reputation, institution, cult etc.)",¹ then is it a very proper thing to do, and, applied to a biographer, "debunker" should be no term of reproach at all. Much needless sentimentalizing over the "Angel of Mercy" or the "Christian General" had blessed neither the adorers nor the objects of such adoration. In bringing to our notice other lineaments in the character of the "eminent Victorians", Strachey was doing a service to his heroes, to the reading public and to truth. There was no vandalism, no perversion of truth, no criminal evasion of facts.

But the aim and front of Strachey's offence is that he is too interesting. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, after quoting a passage² from *Queen Victoria* in which Strachey gives an ironic description of Victoria's adoration of Albert, remarks by way of comment :

"Now that, let us agree, is very smart and amusing. But observe that it tells little of Victoria save that she was passionately in love with her husband—which in itself is no bad thing in a wife, or at worst a venial error. The book aims at showing up Albert the Good to ridicule . . ."³

Smart and amusing ! That is the indictment. But, then, we do not laugh at Victoria because she was passionately in love with her husband; we laugh at her because there was something occasionally childish in her admiration just as there was something a little absurdly serious in the fabric of Albert's mind. It is, however, a misreading of *Queen Victoria* to say that Strachey has shown the Prince up to ridicule. On the contrary, he is one of the towering figures in the book. Commenting on his untimely death, Strachey asks :

¹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

² Quoted in this book on p. 104.

³ *Studies in Literature*, Second Series, 274.

"If, in his youth, he had been able to pit the Crown against the mighty Palmerston and to come off with equal honours from the contest, of what might he not have been capable in his old age? What Minister, however able, however popular, could have withstood the wisdom, the irreproachability, the vast prescriptive authority, of the venerable Prince?"¹

That is not the language of detraction or of ridicule, and was not meant to be.²

Again, Sir Arthur quotes another passage from the same book—the one vividly describing Victoria's happy reactions to the Great Exhibition—and, while admitting that "this trick of quoting in apposition is effective enough", points out that it is "not difficult; and in effect it does not make for the truth." Not difficult! Strachey's less intelligent imitators have learned to their cost that the 'trick' is more like the Djin in the Arabian Nights. And as for truth, the biographer can but aim at near approximations to it. What Victoria thought—*all* that she thought consciously and in the depths of the unconscious—cannot be reproduced even with the technique and on the immense canvas of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Strachey did what he could; he had her diary, and had his general apprehension of her character; and few would deny that Strachey's is a very credible portrait.

As if to clinch the issue, Sir Arthur dismisses Strachey with a breezy

"Hang it all, Sir! If the 1st May, 1851, was a day of ecstasy to her, she was a woman, a little more than thirty, and she was in love, and it is long ago!"

Exactly! That is precisely what Strachey is driving at—that the Queen was also a woman, that she was a

¹ Q. V., 191.

² *Gosse, More Books on the Table*, 6.

young woman in love with her husband. Sir Arthur is almost as a rule the apostle of urbanity and good sense. Perhaps, Strachey's sparkle tickled him in turn ; and, ignoring for the nonce the kernel of honesty that lay within the outer casket of irony and seeming titter, he too, in the best of humour, tells the biographer off.

The other sense of the word "debunk" is to "remove (celebrity) from his pedestal."¹ Out of spite, perhaps, or out of motive-less mischief, the "debunker" irreverently attacks celebrities "in the flank and the rear", and hurls them into the pit of ridicule below. Strachey was *such* a debunker ! Hasn't he laughed at the Pope himself ? Hasn't he made out Gordon to have been a drunkard ? Hasn't he laughed at the studied seriousness of Albert ? Hasn't he poured scorn on Dr. Arnold's educational policies ? A "demon" possessed Florence Nightingale—did it ? It was all perfectly clear what Strachey was trying to do ; he was trying to belittle the great, to ridicule them, to pull them down from their high pedestal !

The chasm that separates Strachey's disciples from his detractors is indeed very wide. The Victorians felt that unpleasing truths should be covered up as far as possible ; that was why there was a commotion when Froude's *Carlyle* appeared. But the men of the post-war world—at least the men of the nineteen-twenties, for, in recent years, the tendency to make gods of the dictators is again lifting its head—had had enough of blind hero-worship ; implicit trust in the infallible wisdom of leaders had landed a whole world in unutterable misery. In a book of portraits published in 1919, Mr. E. T. Raymond wrote :

¹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary.*

"if I have examined with some coolness considerable figures in politics and letters, it is with quite other motives than the satisfaction of a desire to deal caustically or irreverently with established reputations. What I do feel is that in this country the excessive reverence paid to the 'accredited hero' is not a good but a bad thing . . . It means that a 'name', however obtained, exerts the influence that should only attach to a reality."¹

A new generation wished to read biography not as additional stimulus to idolatry but from a desire to explore the human personality, its mysterious depths no less than its dizzy altitudes. What a piece of work is man ! Thus the biographer exclaims and proceeds to state or to offer a solution of the eternal riddle of man. And the reader, too, is eager to grasp the whole man and not merely to gaze like a child at the formal appurtenances and external glitter. There is neither smashing of stained-glass nor idol-breaking ; only an accurate rendering of the still sad music of humanity, neither harsh nor grating, though of ample power to chasten and subdue.

"Debunking", however, unintelligent and unwarranted, is evident in some of Strachey's imitators. It was one thing for Strachey, with his stern sense of artistic discipline and restraint, his mastery of the compositional principles of selection and unification, and his capacity for exploiting the graces of wit and irony, to set about re-creating scenes of vanished splendour and men and women of a baffling variety and complexity. But it is a very different thing for every smart young man to aim his toy catapult of belittlement at the hoary and the eminent. Sir John Squire is stirred deeply enough to write about these inept imitators of the Strachey method :

¹ Preface to *All & Sundry*.

"When some imitator having neither wit nor vision thinks he is vying with Mr. Strachey by pert and cheap scores off the dead, presumptuous familiarity with the great, impertinent assumption of insight, and the piling up of bogus picturesque details, even the most devastating dullness would come as a relief. The Strachey infection has spread widely, particularly in America. I think the worst case I have come across was a 'smart' American *Life of Longfellow*. Longfellow may not have been a great poet, but he was a scholar and a gentleman, and he certainly did not deserve to be called Henry all the time by a patronising modern puppy with no talents at all."¹

No wonder Strachey has had to suffer for the sins of his (unauthorised) followers. His enormous popularity during the early twenties was a decade hence in some danger of quite petering out due to the surfeit of misnamed "Stracheyan" biography. The storm, one hopes, has blown off, leaving Strachey's position in modern letters quite secure.

Strachey, then, was no "debunker" in the derisive connotation of the term. The other attacks levelled against him are more veiled. One of these was launched by the Rev. Charles Smyth in *The Criterion*. The major counts in the indictment are :

"the two subjects which above all others strike Mr. Strachey as genuinely and intrinsically funny, the two subjects which he can scarcely introduce without a covert snigger, are Revealed Religion and the procreation of children in lawful wedlock."²

There are passages in Strachey's works, notably in *Eminent Victorians*, in which his bias against Christianity is made quite plain. This about Manning :

"All he could do was to make the best of a bad business. Accordingly, in the first place, he decided that he

¹ *Flowers of Speech* (1935), 140.

² *The Criterion*, July 1929, 658.

had received a call from God 'ad veritatem et ad seipsum'; and, in the second, forgetting Miss Deffell, he married his rector's daughter."¹

Commenting on the Oxford Movement, Strachey writes :

"The new strange notion of taking Christianity literally was delightful to earnest minds; but it was also alarming. Really to mean every word you said, when you repeated the Athanasian Creed! How wonderful!"²

This about the Pope himself :

"The temporal Power of the Pope had now almost vanished; but, as his wordly dominions steadily diminished, the spiritual pretensions of the Holy Father no less steadily increased. For seven centuries the immaculate conception of the Virgin had been highly problematical; Pio Nono spoke, and the doctrine became an article of faith. A few years later, the Court of Rome took another step: a *Syllabus Errorum* was issued, in which all the favourite beliefs of the modern world—the rights of democracies, the claims of science, the sanctity of free speech, the principles of toleration—were categorically denounced, and their supporters abandoned to the Divine wrath. Yet it was observed that the modern world proceeded as before."³

In fact, the entire history of Manning's spiritual career teems with similar sneers, innuendoes, and even open denunciations of the Church of Rome and Christianity generally.

In other essays and studies the thrusts, if fewer in number, are no less pointed. Thus about Dr. Arnold :

"He consulted the Old Testament, and could doubt no longer...He would treat the boys at Rugby as Jehovah

¹ E. V., 7.

² *Ibid.*, 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 81.

had treated the Chosen People: he would found a theocracy; and there should be Judges in Israel.”¹

Even Gordon does not escape scot-free:

“Whatever he might find in his pocket-Bible, it was not for such as he to dream out his days in devout obscurity. But, conveniently enough, he found nothing in his pocket-Bible indicating that he should. What he did find was that the Will of God was inscrutable and absolute; that it was man’s duty to follow where God’s hand led; and, if God’s hand led towards violent excitements and extraordinary vicissitudes, that it was not only futile, it was impious, to turn another way.”²

Strachey also pokes fun at Gordon’s diagrammatic presentation of his religious thoughts.

In *Queen Victoria*, again, the description of the confirmation of Albert and his brother ends with the mischievous statement: “the loyal inhabitants of Coburg dispersed, well satisfied with their entertainment.”³ There is also a veneer of criticism in the apparently naïve statement of facts relating to Victoria’s religion:

“Her piety, absolutely genuine, found what it wanted in the sober exhortations of old John Grant and the devout saws of Mrs. P. Farquharson. They possessed the qualities, which, as a child of fourteen, she had so sincerely admired in the Bishop of Chester’s ‘Exposition of the Gospel of St. Matthew’; they were ‘just plain and comprehensible and full of truth and good feeling.’ The Queen who gave her name to the Age of Mill and of Darwin, never got any further than that.”⁴

In the portrait of King Philip, in *Elizabeth & Essex*,

¹ E. V., 183.

² *Ibid.*, 222.

³ Q. V., 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 259-60.

there are further ironical references to the Christian faith :

"Holy! But his work too was that; he too was labouring for the glory of God. Was he not God's chosen instrument? The divine inheritance was in his blood. His father, Charles the Fifth, had been welcomed into Heaven, when he died, by the Trinity; there could be no mistake about it; Titian had painted the scene. He also would be received in a similar glorious fashion; but not just yet. He must finish his earthly duties first." ¹

There is no need to multiply such unfortunate instances of lapse on Strachey's part. His descriptions of catechisms, his exposure of the incongruities in the spiritual make-up of Manning, Arnold, and Gordon, his exploitation of the trick of *reductio ad absurdum* by merely quoting from Talbot and Manning, his sly repeated references to the 'pious' Martin—these make no secret of the fact that he had no respect for, or even patience with, Christianity as practised in the lives of some of these people. We do not know whether Strachey had reverence for Jesus Christ or for the Faith in its pristine purity; what we do know is that Strachey was repelled, amused, or shocked by the Christianity he had found being professed and practised by certain classes of people in the past. He was a rationalist, a humanist; and the orthodox Church's hypocrisy and self-contradictions stung him more than its supernatural beliefs and made him stand and stare in sheer self-defence.

Mr. Smyth, however, denounces Strachey not because he has attacked Christianity and Revealed Religion but because he has named it only to ridicule it, to dismiss it of little consequence:

¹ E. & E., 136.

"It is perfectly legitimate for him upon due consideration to defend the Christian revelation and all that it involves and has involved. It is equally legitimate for him upon due consideration to attack it. But, it is not, and in the nature of things can never be, legitimate for him to dismiss it with a snigger."¹

It must be remembered, however, that Strachey did not castigate those who sincerely believed in Christianity, the whole thing and the unique thing and not merely some formal or liturgical part of it. He had toleration enough to respect those who dared to be completely true to themselves, and who refused to debase their consciences by accepting paltry compromises in matters of faith. The following passage, in which Strachey describes the reaction of Keble and Newman to Christianity, will bear this out :

"The Church of England...was the outcome of revolution and of compromise, of the exigencies of politicians and the caprices of princes, of the prejudices of theologians and the necessities of the State. How had it happened that this piece of patchwork had become the receptacle for the august and infinite mysteries of the Christian Faith?... Other men might, and apparently did, see nothing very strange in such a situation; but other men saw in Christianity itself scarcely more than a convenient and respectable appendage to existence...To Newman and Keble it was otherwise. They saw a transcendent manifestation of Divine power, flowing down elaborate and immense through the ages; a consecrated priesthood, stretching back, through the mystic symbol of the laying on of hands, to the very Godhead; a whole universe of spiritual beings brought into communion with the Eternal by means of wafers; a great mass of metaphysical doctrines, at once incomprehensible and of incalculable import, laid down with infinite certitude; they saw the supernatural everywhere and at all times, a living force, floating invisible in

¹ *The Criterion*, July 1929, 660.

angels, inspiring saints, and investing with miraculous properties the commonest material things.”¹

This is not the language of snigger or ridicule; it is the genuine elaboration of praise. Newman and Keble not merely professed Christ but were prepared to follow Him whithersoever He led. But there were others who, for their bellies’ sake, “creep and intrude and climb unto the fold.” Did not the Church harbour men like Monsignor Talbot, “who could mingle astuteness with holiness without any difficulty?” Many people lied and humbugged and speculated about Christianity: was it any use attacking it all in ~~dead~~ seriousness? With dogma, selfishness, superstition, ignorance, self-deception, fraud, diplomacy—with these concomitants of organised religion one can only adopt an ironic attitude; one had to refer to them, in a sentence or two, expose their shallowness, and pass on to the next topic. The maddening and massive bubbles of superstition and folly are to be pricked with the Stracheyan pin of irony, not to be smashed with the ponderous butt-end of Carlyle.

Plausible as such a defence is, it cannot yet be gainsaid that Strachey’s irreverent and “sniggering” allusions to God, to the ways of Providence, to the Trinity, to the efficacy of saying mass, must appear to many unfortunate and in the nature of artistic blots. But taken all in all, Strachey’s work does not deserve Mr. Smyth’s strictures. As Mr. Bonamy Dobré remarks :

“After all, his bias against Christianity implies its corresponding quality, tolerant humanism. He hated Christianity because in his view it destroyed, or smutched, a great deal that was lovely in humanity, and gave rise to

¹ E. V., 14-15.

muddled emotions, muddled thinking, and, abomination of abominations, hypocrisy and cruel dealing. He had no reverence for Christianity, certainly; but, on the other hand, he very much revered the things he believed it spoilt."¹

It is a more difficult task—even an impossible task—to get Strachey acquitted on the second charge framed by Mr. Smyth. Strachey seems to hate sex and is yet very much preoccupied with it. He gets out a lot of fun from the story of Victoria's scandalous uncles none of whom had legitimate offspring at the time of Princess Charlotte's death. Others no less claim his attention :

"More than this, the Duchess of Kent was young, and the Duke was strong; there was every likelihood that before long a brother would follow...."²

Of Lord Melbourne :

"Female society of some kind or other was necessary to him, and he did not stint himself; a great part of every day was invariably spent in it. The feminine element in him made it easy, made it natural and inevitable for him to be the friend of a great many women; but the masculine element in him was strong as well...."³

Of the Prince Consort :

"Time and the pressure of inevitable circumstances were for him; every day his predominance grew more assured—and every night."⁴

Impish as these descriptions are, there are others in *Queen Victoria*, and many more in *Elizabeth & Essex*, which are vibrant with obscure suggestions and dark hints, which are clever but also detestable.

¹ *The Post Victorians*, 579.

² Q. V., 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

What exactly did Victoria's fascination for and adoration of Lord Melbourne amount to? What was behind Disraeli's elaborate façade of romanticism and faery-izing of Victoria? Strachey is on dangerous ground; to ignore these things is to be false to the pressure of facts; but to be too outspoken is to shock and scandalise the reader. Strachey therefore hedges :

"The hard clear pebble, subjected for so long and so constantly to that encircling and insidious fluidity, had suffered a curious corrosion; it seemed to be actually growing a little soft and a little clouded."¹

What does it all mean? What is behind all these mixed metaphors and complicated webs of thought?

In *Elizabeth & Essex* the allusions to sex are, if anything, even more darkly intriguing. One scarcely knows what to think—or what not to think. Talking of Elizabeth's attitude towards sex², Strachey uses words like "at the centre of her being" "precious citadel" "surrounding territories" "outworks and bastions" which are not incapable of vulgar suggestions. Other instances are :

"What state of society was this, where chiefs jostled with gypsies,...where ragged men gambled away among each other their very rags, their very forelocks, their very...parts more precious still, where wizards flew on whirlwinds, and rats were rhymed into dissolution?"³

(Why all this excrescence in describing the Irish society?)

"Manhood—the fascinating, detestable entity, which had first come upon her concealed in yellow magnificence in her father's lap—manhood was overthrown at last, and in the person of that traitor it should be rooted out.

¹ Q. V., 81.

² E. & E., 25; quoted in this book on p. 79.

³ *Ibid.*, 200.

Literally, perhaps...she knew well enough the punishment for high treason."¹

What are we to make of this glamorous and disturbing language? We know that castration was the punishment for high treason, but...what are all these references to 'manhood' and 'yellow magnificence' (and why exactly 'yellow'?) and why should it be "rooted out"?

Mr. Smyth is not quite unjustified, one feels, in affirming that, in *Elizabeth & Essex*, Strachey "shows himself preoccupied with the sexual organs to a degree that seems almost pathological." Yes, it is so; Strachey at once detests and is allured by the terrible phenomenon of sex. The extracts we have given, being divorced from their contexts, may scandalize the reader by their bluntness, their twisted phrasing, their sly animal suggestions, and their lurid similitudes; but when we come across them in the natural course, much of their crudeness is not noticed. They too, in their animality and their mischief, their slyness and their allusiveness, are perhaps integral with Strachey's general scheme.

We have done with Mr. Smyth's strictures—only to attend to the more gentle complaints of Mr. Christopher Hollis. He says that Strachey's method is

"to fix upon a rigidly definite interpretation of his characters, and then to marshal his evidence in such a way as to prove himself right...Only the creator can read with certainty the mind of the creature. It is, therefore, the privilege of the novelist to describe without hesitation the thoughts of his characters. The historian, *qua* historian, can but lay before us their actions or their words."²

¹ E. & E., 258.

² *The Dublin Review*, Jan. 1930, 22.

Let but the historian (or biographer) describe the action, and we will infer the character ourselves ! But, in *Elizabeth & Essex*, Strachey not merely interprets character from action but goes the whole Shakespearean way of letting the action issue from character as well. Such adventures with ideas, such explorations of possibilities, such vivification of reversible reactions between action and character have their place in tragedy and in fiction, but certainly not in biography. This is the trend of Mr. Hollis's criticism.

Strachey's portraiture of Elizabeth and Essex, of Cecil and Bacon, of King Philip, and his reproduction of the cross-currents in their minds on crucial occasions are brilliant and entertaining, and perhaps they are a faithful picture of the originals. But there are no footnotes referring us to unexceptionable authorities ; and often Strachey seems to be mingling the art of the historian with that of the novelist. He says that, with Essex kneeling before her, Elizabeth reminded herself of the story of Hercules and Hylas and wished that she "possessed something of that pagan masculinity." It is a pretty, even a credible, interpretation of Elizabeth's odd behaviour on such occasions. But is it true ? Has a biography any place for mere speculation, for wild and mysterious hypotheses ?

Again, Strachey is at some pains to paint the configuration of Bacon's mind when hopes of the Attorney-Generalship floated before his vision :

"Francis smiled; he saw a great career opening before his imagination—judgeships—high offices of state—might he not ere long be given, like his father before him, the keeping of the Great Seal of England? A peerage!—Verulam, St. Albans, Gorhambury—what resounding title should he take?...But those, after all, were but small considerations...might there not be reserved for him alone

a more magnificent fate? To use his place and his power for the dissemination of learning, for the creation of a new and mighty knowledge, for a vast beneficence, spreading in ever wider and wider circles through all humanity... these were glorious ends indeed! As for himself—and yet another tint came over his fancy—that office would be decidedly convenient. He was badly in want of cash."¹

It is all very interesting—to follow the delectable sinuosities of Francis Bacon's mind and to be allowed to share his inner thoughts. It cannot be denied, however, that this is rather the peculiar prerogative of the creative novelist.

As with Bacon and Elizabeth, so with Cecil and King Philip. Of Cecil, Strachey writes :

"The spectacle of the world's ineptitude and brutality made him, not cynical—he was not aloof enough for that—but sad—was he not a creature of the world himself? He could do so little, so very little, to mend matters; with all his power and all his wisdom he could but labour, and watch, and wait. What else was possible? What else was feasible, what else was, in fact, anything but lunacy?"²

There is also that other revealing passage, the last paragraph of the book, in which we are allowed to share Cecil's thoughts as he sat writing, with the dead Queen in another room. These daring speculations 'fix' Cecil's character in our minds clearly and for ever. But here, as elsewhere, the question is whether the judgement implicit in the passages is justified on the available evidence. Mr. Hollis thinks it is not.

One other example: Strachey is describing King Philip's dying moments—

"He was dying as he had lived—in absolute piety. His conscience was clear: he had done his duty; he had been

¹ E. & E., 50-1.

² *Ibid.*, 107.

infinitely industrious; he had existed solely for the virtue and the glory of God. One thought alone troubled him: had he been remiss in the burning of heretics? He had burnt many, no doubt; but he might have burnt more. Was it because of this, perhaps, that he had not been quite as successful as he might have wished?"¹

Mr. Hollis is stung to the quick, and he asks :

"Has Mr. Strachey any evidence that this 'one thought' troubled Philip, or has he made it up? Was this paragraph written by the historian or by the novelist? . . . if Mr. Strachey can produce certain evidence . . . we can, of course, but bow and accept it. If this tale is only the product of imagination, we have the right to say that we find it quite crudely improbable . . . "²

We have to accept the validity of this criticism—criticism that is applicable only to *Elizabeth & Essex*. Had Strachey attempted to write a full-length biography of Elizabeth, it is certain he could have managed it almost as admirably as he had managed *Queen Victoria*, without having frequent recourses to psychological manipulations and dramatizations. Documents about the Elizabethan Age are negligible in comparison with those that illumine other epochs, the Victorian particularly; and when Strachey further restricted his scope to a bare ten or fifteen years, he found he had ordered more than the camel would carry. But, nevertheless, it was a new experience! The romantic sensed excellent quarry ahead and let loose his imagination in hot pursuit. He would

"call in Herodotus to redress the balance of Thucydides; justify his confident judgements by confessed invention where evidence was lacking and produce a work

¹ E. & E., 171.

² *The Dublin Review*, Jan. 1930, 26-7.

of a new and delightful kind, that falls somewhere midway between history and the historical novel.''¹

The result was that we had some of the most brilliant and colourful pages written in our times. But the example was fraught with very real dangers. Strachey, alert and tactful, knew how to walk on the perilous knife-edge almost unscathed; others, inept and wild, their wit all see-saw between that and this, inevitably turned their novelized biographies into vile antitheses. 'But, happily, their race has been run—or so one hopes.

Another group of detractors—Swinnerton, Dimitri Mirsky² and those of their way of thinking—sum up, their indictment in one word, 'Bloomsbury!' Strachey was aloof and superior, he was a judge and an intellectual—but he was not simply a "dear and dogged" man. Not far different from Cassius, with his lean and hungry look, thinking too much, ever hatching plans against one's security and safety! A highbrow! One who would comprehend the vast circumference of God's universe and imprison it in an epigram! Impudent—bad—and dangerous to know! A snail-like personality, admirably self-protective, but of ominous import to others! Tittering within himself, laughing within his sleeves, assuming the god, affecting the nod, and seeming to shake the spheres! Not a creature of emotion and of aspiration, of bitter-sweet memories and honey-dew fancies—but a machine, singularly competent but singularly heartless. The bracing fluidity, the kindling warmth, the luscious extravagance of Love, they are not for him to feel or to give. Ambitions, achievements, hopes, fears, hesitant endeavours and faltering

¹ *The Dublin Review*, Jan. 1930, 23.

² Swinnerton in *The Georgian Literary Scene* and Mirsky in *The Intelligentsia of Great Britain*.

successes, they are nothing to Lytton Strachey. Prophets and generals, schoolmasters and ecclesiastics, plodding secretaries who reach the top and plotting earls who knuckle under—they are just creatures in a puppet-show to give Mr. Lytton Strachey a rare occasion to condescend to a smile. But an aphorism of La Bruyère's, a triviality of La Fontaine's, a coruscating epigram of Voltaire's, a dissolving incantation of Racine's, a mad-March luminous image of Blake's, a piercing shaft of life and death in disproportion met of Beddoes's—these, so aloof from life and yet so near, these intimations and illuminations from the enchanted island of letters, these were Strachey's companions, in whose presence the mask of superiority vanished, and the humble worshipper was on his knees and the delighted friend cracked many a joke and made one forget the tedium of the live-long day. Yes, there can be no doubt about it ; Strachey was a bookworm and a talker with bookworms !

But a mere bookworm, and a humourless talker with bookworms, could never have so swiftly and unerringly called back to life, with a few flourishes of his pen, such a host of human beings as Miss Nightingale and General Gordon, Melbourne and Palmerston, Dr. Colbatch and Mary Berry, and some scores of others. Strachey was indeed no forbidding intellectual, lit only by the reflected glow from works of literature. His calm, idly amused, aloof exterior should have cunningly belied the smouldering fires of humanity and passion within. Art he worshipped and gloried in—not because it is more vital than Life, though this too is an arguable proposition—and lingered within its sanctified enclosure feeling uplifted the while. Stories of war, of diplomacy, of priests and kings, of

courtiers and politicians, merely reeked with stupidity and inhumanity. Why should he worship people who had bungled and blustered, who had fought and ultimately lost? Gladstone had not the last word in politics, nor Philip in kingcraft, nor Bacon in worldly wisdom! There was no reason why Strachey should bow before them all in unquestioning reverence and burn incense; he had the right to indulge in philosophic doubt, to be detached and to be indifferent.

But the same Strachey was a different man in the presence of the first-rate, whether in Art or in real life. Before Newman and Elizabeth—two very widely different characters—Strachey does not hesitate to uncover himself. And Racine and Shakespeare and Sophocles—they have uttered the very last word, and the hard-headed intellectual may ask and ask, but they will triumphantly abide those questions. And hence Strachey worshipped them.

Strachey, again, has been called a “male blue-stocking.”¹ But Strachey did not ‘affect’ literature, he created it; it was no vulgar fashion with him, but an unescapable passion. Had he merely cared to make some noise, he could have done so by talking about the most new-fangled Dadaist or Vorticist, or even by debunking some great writer like Milton or Wordsworth. His literary subjects are not modern at all. Chinese poetry several centuries old, Racine and Sir Thomas Browne, Dr. Johnson and Henri Beyle, Blake and Beddoes, Voltaire and Madame du Deffand,—these are classics; and they are considered with the reverent dignity due to classics. Strachey knew that on Parnassus, at any rate, there can be no shams, nothing

¹ *The Georgian Literary Scene*, 381.

that is fraudulent, nothing that is implicated within the crude boundaries of space and time. He had wisdom enough to know first things to be first, to worship them as such, and to transmit the noble urge to others.

The irony, no doubt, is there—making his character-studies so odd and so attractive; but the humanity is prominent as well. The great death scenes, the charming vignettes of Victoria's life in the Scottish Highlands, the reproduction of the twists and eddies in Elizabeth's intellectual and emotional organisms—these tell a different tale. Strachey was no stranger to the baffling contradictions of life; he was no emasculated intellectual running away from the current of human passion. His characters are as various as the situations he describes, and both partake, in a measure, of Nature's own rich variety. There are romantics like Essex and Disraeli, mystics like Blake, cold, scheming, competent people like Stockmar and Evelyn Baring, eccentrics like Beddoes, Creevey and Stanhope, dull people like Hartington, mercurial people like Palmerston and Gordon, capable clerics like Creighton and Manning, indolent Titans like Gibbon and Dr. Johnson, and terrible, vengeful men like Voltaire and Bentley—and one has by no means exhausted the Stracheyan *dramatis personae*. Not even, the criticism that Strachey had no true apprehension of the baffling intangibilities of nature, that he had lived in a vacuum and had had no taste of pulsing, trembling life—not even this is quite borne out by the facts. He had lived the best part of his life in the country, and had admired the world of sight and sound and its many-hued and many-toned magnificence and munificence; he had cultivated several life-long friendships; and he had been, in fact, as Britannic as any Briton.

Finally, the question has been asked whether, when not at its best, Strachey's art does not resemble that of the clever caricaturist. All art aims at the imitation of the significant things in life; if it were mere imitation, uncritical mimicry of life, it is to little purpose; but to evoke life's significances is art's privilege and duty. This would, of course, mean a slight heightening of the colours; but that is the very reason why we go to art for a "lesson in deportment on life's scaffold." If, however, art imitates life in such a manner that characteristic features are ludicrously, grotesquely exaggerated, it fails as art, it becomes merely a travesty of life. Caricature is such a travesty of life; its relation to genuine art is similar to the relation that a reflection in a convex or concave mirror bears to a reflection in a plane mirror. The reflection of one's face in a mirror is not the reality; the image of a part of the human body—being its most significant part—is for the time being almost equated with the whole man; and this choosing of the most significant part is the method of art. The caricaturist follows the same method; he too chooses the salient characteristics in form or features; but instead of exhibiting them as they are, he distorts them, turns them almost upside down. This, too, in essentials, is what the writer of burlesques or parodies attempts, though the provinces are different.

Strachey is an artist; he generally wishes to be, and is, true to himself and to the subjects he portrays. In fundamentals, most of his portraits are life-like and are yet full of significance to us. So also is his interpretation of the Elizabethan Age, the Age of Louis XIV, and the age of Queen Anne. When he comes to describe the Victorian Age, however, the caricaturist shows himself. We have quoted, on an earlier page, a

passage¹ from Strachey's essay on Carlyle where he has enumerated some of the more obvious characteristics of the Victorian Age. The details he gives are things seemingly so pointless as pet dogs throwing themselves out of upper-story windows, baths being minute tin circles, and the beds being full of bugs and disasters. Like the caricaturist who would fasten upon his victim's pipe or monocle or curls, Strachey too paints on the canvas the inessential but obvious peculiarities of the Age to make it at once recognizable and laughable. On the other hand, the following passage from Mr. G. M. Young's *Victorian England*, does succeed in giving us a picture that is a likeness and not a caricature :

"The incidents and circumstances, too, of this life: its durable furniture and stated hours; its evening reading and weekly church-going; its long-prepared and long-remembered holidays; its appointed visits from and to the hierarchy of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins; a life which did not differ in essentials whether the holiday was spent at Balmoral or Broadstairs; gave to those who were within it a certain standing with themselves and a cheerful confidence in the face of novelty . . . "²

When the artist wishes to amuse or to score a point over another or to make out a case, then he inevitably vulgarises his art into something other than, and lesser than, art; it becomes caricature, or advocacy, or argument. Instances of such lapses are few and far between in the body of Strachey's writings—but they are there. Strachey wishes to make King Philip absurd—*ex hypothesi* absurd; and so he indulges in palpably indiscreet exaggeration, and twists the portrait to the proportions of a clever and heartless caricature. In describing a character's physical features, a tendency

¹ *Vide ante*, pp. 129-30.

² *Victorian England*, 153.

to overemphasis may be pardoned, may even be admired ; it makes for clearness in outline, and fixes the image in our memory. "Head like a pineapple" ; "nose altogether in the air" ; "his tiny pink-cheeked rotundity" : these are bold, arresting lines, and, at any rate, no harm is done. But if this method were followed in the recital of a whole story, the result would be something very amusing but no homage to truth. Strachey's portrait of *Tien Wang* is a case in point :

"Hong-siu-tsuen . . . saw visions, went into ecstasies, and entered into relations with the Deity . . . He was, he declared, the prophet of God; he was more—he was the Son of God; he was *Tien Wang*, the Celestial king; he was the younger brother of Jesus. . . . The *Tien Wang* established himself in a splendid palace, and proclaimed his new evangel. His theogony included the wife of God, or the celestial Mother, the wife of Jesus, or the celestial daughter-in-law, and a sister of Jesus, whom he married to one of his lieutenants, who thus became the celestial son-in-law; the Holy Ghost, however, was eliminated. . . . In the meantime, retiring into the depths of his palace, he left the further conduct of earthly operations to his lieutenants . . . while he himself, surrounded by thirty wives and one hundred concubines, devoted his energies to the spiritual side of his mission . . . In the recesses of his seraglio, the Celestial King, judging that the time had come for the conclusion of his mission, swallowed gold leaf until he ascended to Heaven." ¹

The whole thing is burlesque, parody and caricature in one ; it cannot be taken seriously as a slice of history. Or, to take another example :

"One sat, bent nearly double, surrounded by four circles of folios, living to edit *Hesychius* and confound Dr. Hody, and dying at last with a stomach half-full of sand." ²

¹ E. V., 212-3; 218.

² P. M., 60-1.

As a caricature of eighteenth-century scholarship, it is most amusing indeed; the four circles of folios and the professor bent nearly double would come off beautifully on a page in *Punch*. Other examples where Strachey has accentuated the features of a character or details of an episode are the portrait of Lord Hartington and the enumeration of the seven stages in the history of his influence upon the fate of General Gordon¹, the report of an imaginary dialogue between Bonga-Bonga and a British Cabinet Minister,² the account of the Arab Mahdi's activities,³ the picture of Dr. Arnold sweeping through the corridors and turning the pages of Facciolati's Lexicon more imposingly than ever⁴, and the description of Freeman's last days :

"Freeman was aghast at this last impertinence; but still he nursed his wrath. Like King Lear, he would do such things—what they were yet he knew not—but they should be the terrors of the earth. At last, silent and purple, he gathered his female attendants about him, and left England for an infuriated holiday. There was an ominous pause; and then the fell news reached Brighton. The professor had gone pop in Spain."⁵

This last occurs in the essay on Froude and is worked out at unnecessary length; it is a story amusingly told, but it has no place in a criticism of Froude except perhaps to suggest the moral that Froude was at last avenged by Horace Round.

It must be admitted, then, that occasionally Strachey allows his admirably self-disciplined art to

¹ E. V., 277-80.

² C. & C., 175-80.

³ E. V., 237.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵ P. M., 202-3.

play the pranks of the clever caricaturist or burlesque writer. M. Maurois himself admits this :

“He is the perfect painter of posthumous portraits, with just a touch—a very slight touch—of caricature.”¹

When the touch is harsher, when truth and humanity are lost in the caricature and the fun, when the artist forgets himself in the entertainer, we cannot but regret it ; but, fortunately, such instances are rare, very rare indeed in Strachey. And so, ultimately, we do not mind it at all.

Debunker, irreverent and flippant critic of religion, detester of sex who is also fascinated by it, biographer diluting fact with fancy, immaculate highbrow, caricaturist—these are all that one reads on the other side of the medal, the wrong side. But when once one has seen the right side, one is so enchanted by it that one cannot tear oneself away ; and one almost forgets there is another side also.

¹ *Aspects of Biography*, 17.

CHAPTER XIII

STRACHEY AND AFTER

We have seen how and why Strachey's critics, so many of them, have arraigned him and his method. But Strachey's disciples, most of them, by their own dubious performances have arraigned him by terrible implication, and an uncritical public has been only too ready to transfer to the parent the sins of the naughty children. Post-War biography in England and America has been inspired by Strachey more than by anybody else. But there have been two foreign influences also. Dr. Emil Ludwig of Germany and M. André Maurois of France may be said to form with Lytton Strachey the modern "Trinity" on the biographical Parnassus. It is likely that Ludwig and Maurois had themselves been influenced by the more original genius of Strachey; and it is not improbable that the Strachey of *Elizabeth & Essex* had learnt a thing or two from both his famous contemporaries.

Post-War English and American biography, under the varied inspiration of the "Trinity", has developed along curious lines. Dr. Ludwig attempted biography several years before Strachey published his *Eminent Victorians*; but it was only after Strachey had started the fashion that Ludwig came to his own. New biographies came with surprising facility and an even more surprising volubility. *Napoleon*, *Bismarck*, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, *Lincoln*, *Three Titans*, *Hindenburg*—these have appeared at regular intervals. Readable and fairly informative, they are not as restrained in expression as they should be. *Kaiser*

Wilhelm II and *Hindenburg* are journalistical propaganda; *Napoleon* and *Bismarck* are at best competent melodrama; *Lincoln* is a misreading of the essential facts of history and a sentimental grandmother's tale; and the three volumes of *Goethe* are an over-elaborate catalogue of love-affairs and neither help us to understand the man nor appreciate his poetry. Besides, his mannerisms are palpably irritating. He overdoes the historic present till we get nausea. *Napoleon* begins thus :

“A young woman is sitting in a tent. Wrapped in a shawl, she is suckling her baby, and listening to a distant rumbling and roaring. Are they still shooting, though night has fallen?”

One might call it an arresting opening if Ludwig soon subsided into the more formal narrative; but no! practically the whole book is written in this staccato style. As we turn back the leaves, the affectation jars more and more on our senses; but Ludwig sweeps on unconcernedly to the death-scene :

“At five o'clock, the rage of the south-east trade wind is redoubled, and two trees of the latest planting are uprooted. At this moment, the man on the bed is in the throes of a prolonged rigor. There is no sign of pain; his eyes are widely opened, staring into vacancy; the death-rattle is in his throat. As the tropical sun sinks into the sea the Emperor's heart stops beating.”¹

In *Bismarck* it is the same story. Through seven hundred pages the historic present is riddled through with a tiresome pertinacity. Sometimes a story is varnished and exhibited :

“Bismarck is standing in the village school at Varzin, pointing out places on the map. He tells the youngsters how Germany is made up, and what it used to look like.

¹ *Napoleon* (George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1935), 674.

He asks one of the boys a question, and is irritable because he cannot get an answer. The schoolmaster is uneasy as he looks on, being afraid lest the visitor should ask him some questions too." ¹

At other times, Ludwig poses questions and attempts drama :

"Passion? Pangs of conscience? A firstborn son's sense of honour? Youth outgrows these troubles. Forward!" ²

And elsewhere, he addresses his hero directly :

"Mighty figure! How much did you owe to that physique of yours, although you hardly ever came to actual tests of fist and muscle! Your body and your accomplishments are identical: the will of a giant vibrant with the electric charge of magnetic nerves." ³

This kind of writing can be effective—only if the charm is incanted on very rare and appropriate occasions. But Dr. Ludwig knows no restraint and shouts the charms at us so often that they sound frivolous and prove useless. Not even as a record of facts is his presentation always reliable. On the issue between Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm II, Ludwig takes sides; this is perhaps inevitable; but why should he load the dice vengefully against the Kaiser? Mr. Nowak's *Kaiser & Chancellor* is a healthy antidote to the feverish generalizations in *Bismarck* and *Kaiser Wilhelm II*. Another German writer, René Fülöp-Miller, has in a way beaten Ludwig on his own ground.

In his introduction to *Lincoln*, Ludwig confessed :

"He has fascinated me for years . . . a personal sympathy which I have never felt so strongly for any other great man of history."

¹ *Bismarck* (George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1929), 597.

² *Ibid.*, 507.

³ *Genius & Character* (Life & Letters Series), 51.

It was therefore necessary to write the book in order to give emotional release to his enthusiasms through the medium of art. To M. Maurois also

“biography is a means of expression when the author has chosen his subject in order to respond to a secret need in his own nature.”¹

In reading M. Maurois’s books, we just know as much about the heroes as about their biographer; in other words, he is interested in bringing out in bold relief those aspects of his heroes’ characters with which he is in greatest sympathy. Not so verbose as Dr. Ludwig, not so pungent at times as is Strachey, M. Maurois is the ideal story-teller. *Ariel*, his most well-known work, is novelised biography. We are told little about Shelley’s poetry; the human drama is the main thing. The Shelleys, Byron, Hunt, Trelawny, the glamorous and silly Countess Guiccioli are just characters in a romantic novel. It is not Shelley and Byron we are reading about, but *Ariel* and *Don Juan*!

Strachey’s *Queen Victoria* was a masterpiece of one kind; Maurois’s *Ariel* was a masterpiece of another kind. Its uniform geniality and lightness make it a literary delicacy that dissolves in our mouths in an instant. Let us sample a morsel or two:

“Shelley glided in, blushing like a girl, and holding out his two hands gave the sailor’s a warm pressure. Trelawny looked at him with surprise. It was hard to believe that this flushed and artless face could be that of the genius and rebel, reviled as a monster in England, and whom the Lord Chancellor had deprived of his rights as a father.”²

“When Don Juan himself followed, all Pisa was at the windows to see the English Devil and his menagerie. The procession was well worth seeing; five carriages, six

¹ *Aspects of Biography*, 111.

² *Ariel* (Penguin Edn.), 218.

men-servants, nine horses, dogs, monkeys, peacocks, and ibises, all in line.''¹

The crude details of reality—some few indispensable ones—are given; for the rest, men and things, rake or poet or rascal or imbecile, dungeon or boat or swimming or dinner, all are jerked into the kaleidoscope of M. Maurois's compelling art and the reader is completely charmed by the pattern that has formed before him.

In his later books, *Disraeli*, *Lyautey* and *Byron*, Maurois seems to be gravitating towards greater elaboration. They have all the lucidity that one may demand and plenty of charm to rush the reader through from cover to cover. But we miss the other-world fragrance of *Ariel*. *Byron* especially is a very serious, honest piece of work—about twice as long as *Ariel*. But it cannot be classed as creative literature. Trying to write just a little too much, M. Maurois is in danger of banking on the publicity value of his earlier triumphs.

It is profitable to contrast the methods of Strachey and M. Maurois. In a study of *Disraeli*, the biographer has to tackle his hero's politics; and in the studies of Shelley and Byron, he has to tackle their poetry. But in his biographies M. Maurois exquisitely manages to say nothing about *Disraeli*'s politics or Shelley's or Byron's poetry. As Professor Ifor Evans pointed out, M. Maurois

"reminds me sometimes of an overkind schoolmaster who says: 'The next piece is a little difficult. We will come back to it later.' M. Maurois never comes back."²

How different is Strachey's evaluation of Beddoes the poet or of Victoria the Queen! To deal with the

¹ *Ariel*, 214.

² *The Manchester Guardian Weekly*, March 1936.

involutions of diplomacy or the nuances of criticism is no doubt perilous; but the biographer should not shirk the difficulty. How Florence Nightingale manipulated the high officials at the Foreign and War Offices, or how Gordon forced the hands of Gladstone to send the relief expedition to Khartoum, or how Prince Albert manoeuvred Palmerston into a grudging submission, or how Beddoes's poetry is an exact reincarnation of the poetry of the Elizabethans—these are tough nuts to crack, and yet Strachey has smoothed all this intractable matter into artistic shape.

Strachey and Maurois, it appears, have curiously reacted to each other. From the careful and thorough documentation in *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*, Strachey proceeded to sketch a more unfettered imaginative portrait in *Elizabeth & Essex*; on the other hand, Maurois's progress has been from the self-sufficing loveliness of *Ariel* to the satisfactory, comprehensive and informative life of Byron. This is also the case with Mr. Philip Guedella. He began in the early Twenties as a typical Bright Young Man and published clever 'portraits' of several prominent people. Mr. A. G. Gardiner had set the ball rolling, and other smart spirits—Hannen Swaffer, Gamaliel Bradford, Ernest Raymond, Guedella himself—were only too eager to exploit the *genre*. In these inconsequential pieces, Guedella was unfailingly bright though not always relevant. As the years passed, however, Guedella came to publish books of a more ambitious nature. *Palmerston*, *Gladstone & Palmerston* and *The Duke* are sustained works of biography and the last is an achievement. The trouble with Mr. Guedella is that he lacks artistic discipline; when he has learnt a trick, he must repeat it with noxious reiteration. The

artifice, for example, of ironically making a number of accidents take place simultaneously, is one of Strachey's effective charms. The last sentence in section IX and the first in section X respectively in *Elizabeth & Essex* read :

“They had to explain to King Philip that the pious Martin had not only started but that he had also come back..... Essex, too, had come back, and had to face a mistress who was by no means dying.”

This is the cinematographic art of (in Mr. A. C. Ward's language) the “flash back”—the suggestive alternations between “Look here upon this picture and on this!” of Hamlet—and its unexpectedness admirably succeeds if the trick is sparingly used. But in *Palmerston* it is done to death; it is Mr. Guedella's artistic obsession. Nor is *The Duke* itself much freer from this particular mannerism :

“They heard the guns in Brussels; and the inquiring Creevey strolled on the ramparts, while sixteen miles away the Duke was steadyng a line which was often far from steady...”

“The Emperor...a lonely, white-faced man, he stood in the moonlight waiting in a little wood, waiting for troops that never came; his cheeks were wet with tears. Far to the north the Prussian cavalry were sabring the last remnant of the *Grand Armée* under the moon.”

The more obvious Stracheyan artifices—the use of adjectives and substantives, the exploitation of the interior monologue, the shock of epigrammatic statement, the stringing together of a series of trivialities—are all in Guedella and in the other “modernist” biographers, but alas! rarely redeemed or transfigured by the Stracheyan virtues of irony, reticence, humanity, and discipline.

Of other post-War biographers, honourable mention must be made of Mr. Nicolson, Mr. Belloc, Lord David Cecil, St. John Ervine, Mr. Hugh I'A Fausset, Mr. Osbert Burdett, Mr. A. J. A. Symons, Miss Edith Sitwell, Mr. F. A. Simpson, Miss Edith Olivier, Mr. Peter Quennell, Mr. Arthur Bryant, and Mr. Evelyn Waugh (to name no others). Mr. Nicolson's essays in biography like *Verlaine*, *Byron: the Last Journey*, *Swinburne*, *Tennyson*, and the dutiful life of his father, Lord Carnock, are all eminently readable and distinctive in presentation. His *Byron* is perhaps his best achievement, though a case may be also made for his *Verlaine*. It is odd that there should be so many good biographies of Byron; and Mr. Nicolson's partial portrait, somewhat after the manner of Strachey's 'flank and rear' attack in the essay on Gordon, gives us an unforgettable picture of the last years of the poet's life. How much Mr. Nicolson is indebted to Strachey may be seen from the following extract, compact of psychological drama and insight:

"It was always like that: people never left one alone; there he was, good-natured and kindly, and they came along and took advantage of him, and extracted promises, and imposed on him generally. Once again he had been caught in a chain of circumstances; there had been his first visit to Greece, and *Childe Harold*, and *The Corsair*, and that silly passage about the 'hereditary bondsman'; and there had been Hobhouse (damn Hobhouse!), and that egregious ass Trelawny. And as a result here was he, who had never done any harm to any one, sitting alone in Casa Saluzzo, with his household gods once again dismantled around him, and his bulldog growling now and then at the distant voice of Trelawny thundering orders to the servants."

It is a fair generalization that such a passage could not have been written before the advent of Strachey.

He it was who showed, with his urbanity and his culture, his irony and his infinite capacity for taking pains, that what is popular need not necessarily be 'lowbrow', and that scholarship need not necessarily be divorced from wit and sparkle and a sense of aesthetic values.

If Mr. Nicolson chose the last years of Byron's life as subject for his study, Mr. Peter Quennell, in his more recent *Byron: the Years of Fame*, has given us at once a sympathetic and glamorous account of the Byron who awoke one morning and found himself famous. St. John Ervine's *Parnell*, also adopting the 'flank and rear' strategy, is a moving account of the extraordinary career of that frustrated leader of men. Mr. Fausset and Mr. Burdett have tried to bring to a proper fusion the functions of the biographer and the literary critic. Mr. Faussett's *Tennyson, John Donne, Tolstoy*, and other studies have all enough wisdom to instruct and more than enough charm to interest the 'common reader'- Mr. Burdett's lives of the Brownings, of the Carlyles, and of Gladstone are other elegant and useful buckets from that vast ocean of Victorian life. One and all of them have clearly benefited by the Strachey method in historical biography.

Other writers have shed a lot of light on some hitherto obscure people. Lord David Cecil's *The Stricken Deer*, the biography of William Cowper, has succeeded in executing a lovable and memorable portrait of the sensitive poet, the affectionate friend and the rare soul that Cowper was; Miss Edith Olivier has galvanized with her pervasive, but by no means pernicious satire, the eccentric personality of Alexander Cruden; Marchesa Origo's miniature life of Allegra, Byron's illegitimate daughter, and Mr. Symons's understanding sketch of Baron Corvo, are both minor

triumphs in the *genre*; Mr. Bryant's *Pepys*, and Mr. Waugh's revealing portrait of the Elizabethan Jesuit, Edmund Campion, enhance our appreciation of the nobly human amongst us; and Mrs. Virginia Woolf has even given us an exquisite biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pet dog, Flush, and the late John Galsworthy also attempted a similar portrait of his own dog in *Memories*. In *Portraits in Miniature* Strachey gave his readers some rich, rare specimens of humanity, and suggested by implication the infinite variety, the core of true humanity in the forgotten and half-forgotten Haringtons and Muggletons and Aubreys and Mary Berrys. He showed that the subject of a sketch need not have been a colossal figure in his own day or a popular figure afterwards; it was enough if he had been human—and who amongst the children of Adam is not? Other writers, with more energy and industry than Strachey, were quick to follow his great example and erect little or big shrines to the undying humanity in a Campion, in the mere child Allegra, in the Evangelical leader John Newton, in the sinister Baron Corvo.

While Strachey's more intelligent disciples and followers have thus learnt the things he had to teach by precept and by example, and have even occasionally gone one better, there have been others who merely fastened upon the so-called "debunking" method in Strachey and applied it to other heroes like Matthew Arnold, Sir Walter Scott, Carlyle, George Washington, Dickens, Gladstone, and other "famous" characters in history. As Mr. George Sampson remarks :

"It is now possible to find studies in biography, specifically described as 'new' or 'modern', which contain

nothing but the impertinence of youth to maturity or the obtuseness of stupidity to achievement.”¹

These are mere rehashes, journalistic summaries or paraphrases of “standard biographies” already in existence, and the glitter in them is cheap (bought in the Co-operative Stores, as Strachey might have put it) and the humour is extremely thin, so thin that the entire strategy can be seen through at a glance. A thorough misunderstanding of Strachey’s technique and a hopeless misapplication of it allied themselves to unbalanced announcements on the publishers’ blurbs—and, in result, the week-end libraries, the railway book-stalls and second-hand book-shops were all glutted with a kind of padded writing on eminent personages till at last sanity revolted and wished to annihilate Strachey, the ordainer (as it was erroneously supposed) of this new order and the inspirer of these idol-breaking, head-smashing, gala-dayish athletics. It was a nasty corner the “new” biography found itself in; but sanity has once again, and as surely, asserted itself and the best specimens of biography continue to be delightfully “modern” without being insultingly or incomprehensibly “modernist.”

It is wise to leave these delinquents unnamed;² it is very safe too. Anyhow the tide has turned. Recent exhibits of historical biography—Mr. F. A. Simpson’s two *Louis Napoleon* volumes, Miss Edith Sitwell’s *Victoria of England*, Roger Fulford’s *George IV*, Dormer Creston’s *The Regent and His Daughter*,

¹ Article on ‘Biography’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

² Mr. Hackett’s *Henry VIII*, Mr. Woodward’s *Washington*, Mr. Kingsmill’s *Matthew Arnold*, and Mr. Bechhofer Roberts’s *This Side Idolatry* are some of the better known specimens.

Mr. Bryant's *Charles II*—have unquestionably proved that the Stracheyan influence has been in the direction of progress and not of aesthetic anarchy and retrospective vandalism. So powerful has been his influence that even "set" series like those projected in recent years by Messrs. Duckworth, Nelson, Peter Davies and the Hogarth Press are giving us excellent biographies-in-brief, and every day we stumble upon satisfying books by a Maurois, a Laurence Binyon, a Stephen Leacock and by others not (as yet) as well known.

In one sense, most of Strachey's works were unoriginal; he merely exquisitely compounded into admirable art the materials gathered with infinite industry by other patient scholars, often generations of them. Like Shakespeare, Strachey too freely borrowed—but he transformed his dead material into the pomp and glow and varied circumstance of actual life. And yet the "dull professor" could have complained that it was not fair to rob him of the fruits of his research and at the same time to ridicule his pomposity, his seriousness, his absolute devotion to truth. Time brings with it its own sweet revenges; the professors have realized that either they should take immediate steps to preserve themselves or perish in the attempt; and, apparently, they are going to stand their ground with dignity and even elicit the applause of the 'common reader.' Professor R. W. Chambers's *Sir Thomas More* and Professor J. E. Neale's *Queen Elizabeth* are very encouraging signs of the times. They combine scholarship with charm, and accuracy with elegance of style; and they are authoritative while preserving an admirable artistic integrity. Mrs. Catherine Carswell in her *Burns* and Mr. Bryant in his *Pepys* had already sounded these new possibilities in biography; but

Professors Chambers and Neale faced the problem boldly and turned doubtful assets into true glories. Professor Neale's was the greater task and his achievement is therefore the more astonishing. Comparisons were bound to be—with Sidney Dark, with Strachey himself. One read the following in Professor Neale's book :

“Francis was wisdom's child. The cold, clear light of human reason has rarely burnt so brightly. He wrote as an oracle; he spoke with the persuasive tongue of an orator. Nature, however, had shrunk from perfecting her miracle. There was a fundamental ineptitude of character, a lack of emotion, of virility, which left out as it were the keystone of the arch... His mind soared into the heavens, but his feet were of clay.”¹

One instinctively compared this with the gorgeous and swelling rhetoric in Strachey's book, and one felt that perhaps Professor Neale's was the simpler way of stating the paradox of Bacon's character. As if the revenge should be complete, Professor Neale, in whose massive four hundred pages there is not an important statement for which he cannot adduce unexceptionable authority, has deliberately “removed the elaborate scaffolding of documentary authority used in the construction of the book.”² There is not even a ‘Select Bibliography’—that courtesy appendage to even the most inconsequential biographical miscarriage. But students of British history know that Professor Neale is a reputed authority on the Tudor period and have not seldom masticated his original contributions to learned and exclusive Journals. Such a man boldly coming forward to write a ‘popular’ biography, after the manner of Strachey's *Queen Victoria*—that was

¹ *Queen Elizabeth* (Cape, 1934), 331.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

a Gilbertian somersault, and an important event in the history of biography.

After all, Lytton Strachey had not occurred in English literature in vain. The new orientation he gave to the art of biography—that too has not been in vain. At first it was a little difficult to decide whether he was an evil omen or a thing of happy augury. For if one failed in the Boswellian method of elaborate accretion, one was no doubt long-winded and dull, but one was useful all the same; but if one failed in the Stracheyan method, one was mischievous without being interesting and insipid without being useful. But now we know; Strachey remains, a classic by himself, a classic as a matter of right, and an example to all future biographers. And the sacred art of biography, too, has come out of the rut into which Strachey's unintelligent imitators had derailed it and is learning to harmonize the authority and attention to detail of a Boswell with the perspicacity and artistic sense of a Lytton Strachey.

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